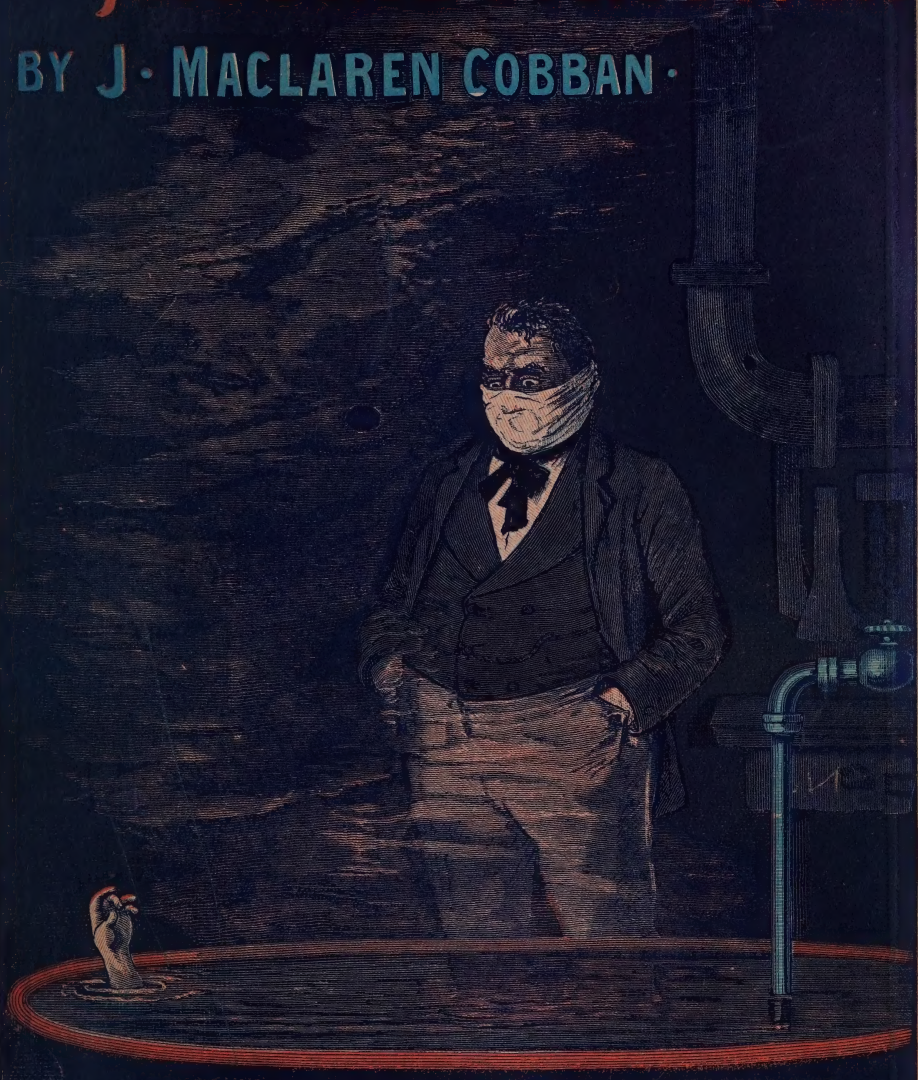
THE MISSING PARTNER

BY J. MACLAREN COBBAN.



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THE MISSING PARTNER.

THE MISSING PARTNER.

OR,

TINTED VAPOURS.

BY

J. MACLAREN COBBAN,

AUTHOR OF "THE CURE OF SOULS."

"Guilty creatures sitting at a play
Have by the very cunning of the scene
Been struck so to the soul, that presently
They have proclaimed their malefactions."

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INTRODUCTION.

My name is Unwin—Gerald Unwin. "Rev. Gerald Unwin, B.A.," I am usually styled on the backs of envelopes; for, though I have laid aside clerical duties, for the present at least, I am still in orders. Now that I enjoy leisure and the absence of those petty worries which prey upon the subordinate cleric more than the lay mind can conceive, I set myself to write out the narrative of strange event and experience which, in the Providence of God, have worked such a change in my condition. I promised myself and my friends some months ago that I would do this, but until now I could not bind myself to my desk; I have had too much other occupation, desultory, perhaps, but agreeable: in short, like the man in the parable, I have married a wife. Yet that is the very reason why my friends in town have pestered me, and now grow clamorous to know all about it. They have been good enough to remind me that, though it is proverbial clergymen get handsome wives, yet it is quite out of the common for so ordinary looking a priest as myself to win a lady so beautiful and distinguished as (they are pleased to say) my wife is; and, further, that though it has been whispered fine looking clerical tutors have had the audacity to aspire to ladies of very high rank indeed, their aspirations have usually been overwhelmed with contumely; and, lastly, they are consumed with wonder that I should have lighted upon a refined and delicate Frenchwoman in the wilds of Lancashire of all conceivable places. Perhaps, they add, with a touch of sarcasm which I can complacently endure, I was the only creature like a gentleman she had ever seen.

But my story is all too serious and terrible to be introduced with persiflage.

THE MISSING PARTNER.

CHAPTER I.

A MODERN TOPHET.

ABOUT two years ago I accepted a curacy in the village of Timperley, within a few miles of a large Lancashire town. If I had had much choice I would not have chosen a cure of souls among mill-hands and miners. I would have preferred to perform my duties under a clear sky, rather than under a canopy of smoke, within call of fields and woods, rather than in a forest of tall chimneys and black heads of coal pits. But since I was disappointed in my hope of a cure in a certain pleasant village of Sussex, I resolved to go to Timperley in Lancashire. I even managed to set out for my sphere of labour with something like cheerfulness when the time came. I thought that the mill-hands of the north probably needed my ministrations as much as the peasants of the south. Besides, I had ever understood that Lancashire folk, if hard and rough, were genuine and thorough, and hid often beneath a shrewd burr-like exterior, a great deal of warm human nature. So when one dark afternoon of February I alighted at the nearest station on a branch railway, and asked a fellow-passenger, who looked like a native, and who was hurrying away, whether he could direct me to Timperley,—when I was answered with a curt "Noa," I was not disconcerted. I received a somewhat unintelligible direction from a station porter, and, leaving orders concerning my luggage, I went out into the dark and drizzle to walk to Timperley.

I tramped for half a mile or so along a well-paved road, and

then (according to direction, I thought) I turned down a narrow lane between a hedge and a wooden fence. I trudged some distance through deep mud, now stumbling upon lumps on the firm edge of the cart-way, and now plunging into holes, when the lane seemed to lose itself in a field. I hesitated a little and then resolved to return to the road. My eyes were now used to the dark, and I perceived a footpath across the field inclining back towards the road. I struck into this, thinking it would save me some distance. But I soon found to my vexation that "the shortest way across is the longest way round." I persevered over the sodden grass, and sometimes something else besides grass, and presently began to scent somewhat of the pleasant odours of rusticity, and my spirits rose a degree or two. I passed a low black wooden building, and guessed it was a cow-house; I heard the animals pulling at their chains and munching their food. By-and-by I found myself again on a tolerably good road, came upon some houses of the suburban semi-detached villa description (at one of which I knocked and inquired my way), and soon, stumbling and splashing through exasperating mud and cinders, came out upon the edge of the valley in which Timperley lay. I stood and gazed around me. Such a spectacle I had never seen before. I listened to, and felt the feverish rush of the life of Lancashire industry. The birr and buzz of thousands of spindles, the swift click and thud of shuttles and looms, and the regular sob and respiration of mighty engines, mingled with the rush of waters and the plaintive panting of some machine as of an enslaved geni of the Arabian Nights. I could not at first apportion the sounds to the various groups of buildings beneath me. On my right was a many-storeyed mill, whose bright windows were reflected in the glassy surface of a pond, on the banks of which there grew, pensive and forlorn, a few scrubby trees. On my left lay an aggregation of long, low buildings, with glass roofs, that looked, with their shining backs, like monstrous couching dragons of antediluvian days. Farther up the valley was another group of buildings, wrapped in a cloud of steam. Immediately before me was a ruined mill, unroofed and gaunt, with its belltower and its tall, cold chimney, outlined against the sky; behind it was another group of irregular buildings. A dozen tall chimneys poured their smoke into the sulphurous air, which was per-

vaded by a certain glow—insufficient to dissipate the darkness, but enough to make the stream, which wound down the valley, gleam like a black gigantic snake. Now and again furnace-mouths opened and glowed with a ferocious glare, while weird tongues of lurid flame flickered on the slope and ridge behind.

As I looked, a great repulsion seized me. I recalled the Prophet's description in the Old Testament, of the Valley of Hinnom or Tophet, in which men sacrificed to strange gods, and caused their sons and daughters to "pass through the fires to Moloch." This, surely, was one of the Tophets of modern days, in which the sons and the daughters of England are made to pass through the fires of the Moloch of Wealth and the Baal of all-devouring Industry.

And still, as I looked and thought of this, the bell-tower of the ruined mill, before me, fell with a loud clang, and there uprose into the air—to mingle with the other sounds — the frantic screaming of pigs and neighing of horses. I was not surprised; I was somehow prepared by the scene, not to be surprised at anything that might happen in this strange region. I passed, however, hurriedly down the slope by a rough path, and found the road into the valley and the village. I heard voices and saw a dim crowd of people about the ruined mill; but the stream, black and evil-smelling, was between me and it, and I had perforce to let my curiosity wait. I continued my way into the village, which, I found, lay behind the many-storeyed mill towards the mouth of the valley and close to the high road, by which I should have entered it. I had, as it were, let myself in by the back-door. Before I was well into the village I passed an arrangement of low buildings with blank walls to the road, from which came no sound of life or work, but, instead, the vilest and strangest smells that ever offended the sense, and from the midst of which, rose a towering chimney that smoked consumedly. These, I guessed, were part of the chemical works of which I had heard. I found the rectory at the other end of the village. I did not go in—the rector was in bed, ill—but asked to be directed to my lodgings.

I had some tea (after some leading questions from my landlady, which, put by another than a Lancashire woman, would have been considered rude), and then I prepared to go to dinner at the house of Mr. Emmanuel Steinhardt, one of the creators

and lords of the Tophet, into which I had entered. He was rector's churchwarden, and I had corresponded with him concerning the curacy, and had made this dinner engagement a week ago. I asked my landlady where I should find Timperley Hall.

"Oh," said she, looking at me with a comical eye of respect, "you'll be going to Muster Steenhart's?" (so she pronounced the magnate's name.) "He's at th' other end o' th' village on Shale Brow" (she called it "Brew"). "Stop a bit, mon." She went to the door of the room and called, "Dick, lad, you mun tak' th' parson up to Muster Steenheart's." Then, turning to me, she said, "He'll tak tha, mon," and withdrew.

I was amused; and when a minute or two later she called from the bottom of the stairs—"Art ready, parson? Th' lad's waiting"—I positively laughed to myself. My amusement increased when I saw my guide, a young Hercules in clogs, who might easily have "taken" me to Timperley Hall and farther under his arm. When we were in the village street I tried to enter into conversation with him, but I could prevail on him to say nothing but "Yea," or "Noa," which he uttered in a booming bass voice. This was not gruffness, I afterwards found, but good solid shyness.

My weird impression of the place was not lessened by my first grotesque impression of its people.

Timperley Hall I discovered to be a long, old fashioned, two-storeyed building, of no style in particular, something in shape like a thick letter I—with a gabled wing, that is, at either end. It overlooked the valley from the side opposite to that from which I had first viewed it. Soon I was in its drawing-room, shaking hands with Mr. (or Herr) Emmanuel Steinhardt; for I saw at once that he was of pure Teutonic breed, and I heard, when he had spoken a few words, that he must have spent all his youth and part of his manhood in the Fartherland: he spoke perfect English, but with an indescribable, tell-tale accent. I had just time to notice his burly fiugre, his somewhat rounded shoulders, and his massive bald head, when I was introduced to his wife, a tall, handsome, Lancashire woman (her speech betrayed her), with grey hair, evidently a good deal older than he; then to Miss Louise Lacroix (it was afterwards that I learned the spelling of the name), of whom I will only say at present that she

looked refined and foreign—a rare exotic in this region of surprises; and, lastly, to "my son, Frank," a young man of one or two-and-twenty, who looked in every way and spoke like an Englishman. These introductions over we sat down to wait for the announcement of dinner. There was very little said: they seemed constrained, and I was, perhaps, shy. I had opportunity to observe how monstrously gorgeous was the furniture of the long, low-pitched room. The walls were covered with gilt girandoles and oil paintings of all sizes, with heavy guilt frames; the floor was covered with a Brussels carpet, of a rich flowery pattern, upon which lay here and there fleecy rugs, whose raw reds and blues seemed to have been recently imparted in the chemical vats of the village. We sat on chairs and ottomans upholstered in blue and yellow satin, and had about us other chairs which evidently were never intended to be sat in, but only to be wondered at and to be in the way, like many other things glorious and golden. The only cheerful and homelike thing in the room was the blazing fire, piled up in the largest and newest of grates, and reflected from the heaviest and newest of brass fenders and fire things.

No one seemed to think of trying to set me at my ease. Mr. Steinhardt sat watching the clock, and at intervals throwing questions over his shoulder to his wife. (One question I noted was, "Is Jim coming at all?" To which she answered, "Jim said he might look in after dinner and smoke a pipe;" and I wondered who Jim was.) Frank occasionally glanced at me as if he would like to speak, but he continued his examination of the gimcracks on the table by which he sat, as if he had never seen them before. I was wishing I had not accepted this invitation for my first evening in Timperley, when the young lady edged her chair a little nearer to me, and said, with the sweetest of smiles and the most musical of tones—

"You come from the South—from London—yes?"

Her accent was that most delightful of all foreign accents—the accent of an educated Frenchwoman. I answered that I had come from London, though I was not native there.

"I also," said she, "come from the south—from London last, but from Paris before."

Here was common ground for pleasant reminiscence, and we became friends at once.

While we were talking, I happened to glance across in Mr.

Steinhardt's direction: he was looking straight at me for the first time. He rose and angrily rang the bell. Presently we went in to dinner. I, of course, sat next to him on his right, and noticed with some curiosity, as he carved, that his hands seemed encased in very fine lemon-coloured gloves. A second look assured me that they were merely stained. His son's hands were similar, but of a deeper hue. For the first time it occurred to me that my host was the lord of the Chemical Dye Works.

"They were your works, I suppose, Mr. Steinhardt," I said, "that I passed after entering the village?"

I was alone on my side of the table, and had to speak to him, or be silent.

"Yes," said he, rather abruptly. Then, after a pause, "You came by that road then?"

So I related how I had lost my way, and how I had been struck (I did not say "disagreeably") with the impression of ferocious energy my first view of the valley gave me.

"'Ferocious energy,'" he repeated, with a smile, looking at me as if he liked the phrase and thought the better of me for having uttered it. "It is a great place for industry, and it will be a greater yet."

I asked him how it happened that a large mill was unused and falling in ruins.

"That is mine," he answered. "It is unlucky. It was a spinning mill; once one of the floors fell through, killing many people, and twice it was burned, all in ten years—yes, all in ten years."

"And to-day it seems to have added to its work of killing." He looked at me. "You have not heard, perhaps," I said.

"What?"

I related what I had seen and heard.

"Have you heard of this?" he asked, glancing from one to another.

No; none of them had heard.

"I must see to it," he said, and stirred as if he would set out at once; but he added, "after dinner."

And after dinner he set out; and I thought better of him than I had at first been disposed to do because of his kindly feeling, though it were only for pigs.

In the drawing-room, however, I was struck with the altered manners of the family in the temporary absence of its head. Mrs. Steinhardt was gossipy and kind—even motherly; Frank threw off his awkwardness and shyness, and delighted me with his skill on the piano;

while Mademoiselle Lacroix was very bright and winsome. Yet, now conversing with her and now observing her (when, for instance, she sat near Frank at the piano), I could not but remark that a look of sadness overspread her sweet face—of sadness, and as of anxiously waiting for something or someone—whenever she was left to her own thought. This expression I was able to account for satisfactorily very soon.

We had been some time in the drawing-room when the door-bell sounded a loud peal, and at once I saw that subdued expression of patient waiting on Miss Lacroix's face flash up into one of eager expectancy. For a moment she looked at the door with her pale face gone paler, and listened with quick ear till she heard the voice of the visitor, when her eager hope collapsed and sank into deeper sadness than before. It was a rich, cheery voice I heard come from the hall.

"Is th' new parson come?" it asked of someone.

"That's Jim," said Mrs. Steinhardt, with a laugh — "my brother."

This, then, was the gentleman who had come to smoke a pipe. He entered—a tall, stout, ruddy Englishman, gone somewhat grey. He at once took possession of the room and of the persons in it. His bright and ample presence extinguished the gaudy, gorgeous furniture, and his voice, instinct with humour and unself-consciousness, filled the void which usually reigned in that room.

"Ah," he said to me, "so you've come to try and enlighten our Hottentots about a thing or two in this world and the next. Well, you can only do your best, you know; we'll try to make you comfortable and back you up. Come all the way from London to-day, I suppose!—have you got yourself fixed up yet in th' village?—what some author chap—Matthew or Mark Summat or other—calls a 'Lancashire Hell-hole.' Well, we're not quite so bad as that yet here, but we're getting to it. But it can't be helped, you know; we ha' gone forrard and we mun go forrarder, as the rabbit said when he let th' weasel get him into a hole. Yes, 'Hell-hole'; but it should be a useful change for you; it may give you an idea when you want to describe to your congregation the real——"

"Jim, lad," interrupted his sister, "you're forgetting yourself!"

"Eh? Oh!—ah, well I can remember, you know, when all round about here was as sweet

and pretty a place—I was born back o' th' White Moss" (indicating that locality over his shoulder), "Toppleton way."

Thus the full, quaint and careless stream of his talk flowed on, meandering about one person and another, this subject and that. He seemed a well of curious and fearsome Lancashire lore—lore of the days when spinning and weaving were done in the cottage homes of remote hamlets and homesteads, when Lancashire energy applied itself to useful work, and not to useless toil, when its fabrics were made to be worn, and not merely to be sold—the days when the steam-engine was not yet with its all-devouring, all-enslaving machinery.

We had talked thus for about an hour—or, rather, listened to Mr. Birley talk—when he paused and looked round (he had been fidgeting in his chair for some time).

"What's got 'Manuel?" he said, addressing his sister. "Is he stuck till midnight in his laboratory again? Doesn't seem as if that smoke was to come off to-night. In Paul's house, now, it used to be 'Smoke where you please'—drawing-room or anywhere. Poor Paul!"

I was astonished and alarmed to see Miss Lacroix rise hurriedly and glide without a word from the room. Mrs. Steinhardt made as if she would follow her, but she did not. She sank back in her chair, with a sigh.

"Jim! Jim!" she exclaimed reproachfully. "Why *will* you say things, when you know the poor girl cannot bear allusions to it?"

"Ah," said Birley, humbly. "Poor lass! Her father," he explained, turning to me, "has never come back from London. Poor Paul!" He was visibly affected.

"He had to go to the Law Courts there," said Mrs. Steinhardt, "more than a year ago, about some dreadful business of the Chemical Works. He was my husband's partner."

"*Hildershemier* v. *Lacroix and Steinhardt*"—(Frank turned on the music-stool to correct his uncle's pronunciation). "Well," said he, "that's all right; any way, that was the case. May be"—turning again to me—"you remember it in the papers. It was about the infringement of a chemical patent 'Manuel had put them up to in his eternal laboratory."

"Nay, uncle," interrupted Frank, flushing up. "It wasn't father's fault more than anyone else's."

"Ay, lad," said Birley, "of course you know all about it. But you're right to stand up for

your father. However, Paul, as the chief of the firm, went up to London to fight the case. He fought and lost to the tune of £20,000 damages—which, I suppose, drove him mad, poor fellow, for he's never come back—made away with himself, very likely, or somehow got made away with."

"But surely interrupted Frank again, "it could hardly be the damages did it, uncle? You remember he went to Paris after the trial about some pattern business for the Print Works, and then got back to London again."

"Ay, lad, but £20,000 damages can make a man feel very queer all the way to Paris and back. At any rate, poor Paul's gone—lost in the great London wilderness."

"It is a very extraordinary affair," said I. "But I don't remember seeing anything of it in the papers."

"It got into the papers, though," said Birley, "to some extent—not much. We didn't want a noise about a private, painful thing like that."

"But," said I, wondering, "I suppose inquiries were made?"

"They made inquiries high and low," said Birley; "they laid detectives on, and everything, but nothing came of it. Did there, Frank?"

"No," said Frank—"nothing at all."

"Did you try to trace him out of London?" I asked.

"I suppose they did," said Birley.

"Yes—oh yes," said Frank.

I wondered that Birley should keep using the word "they." Had he borne no share in the investigation himself? I had my thought answered at once.

"I wasn't able to go to London myself," said Birley; "I was laid up with a broken leg; and, when I got better, I didn't think it was any use my going. There was an end of Paul—that was certain; for he wasn't the man to knock under like, and get lost just."

"Perhaps, Mr. Unwin," said the lady, looking down at her dress, "you're surprised that we are not in black. I wanted to go into black at once, but Louise wouldn't hear of it. She has some obstinate idea that her father can't be dead. I really believe, to look at her sometimes, she expects him to walk in at that door some day with his bag in his hand."

"Paul," interrupted Birley, "will walk no more in this world; and if the lass doesn't put on a black frock, she wears black on her life, poor thing! She doesn't thrive in our rough Lancashire," he said, addressing

me; "and if you can talk to her a bit, and take her out of her mopish ways, it will be a blessing. She's real French—but she's a good girl," he continued, as if it were usually to be expected that French should mean "not good." "Her mother was real French, and her father almost, and she was educated in France. So if you can talk to her about France and Paris, and all that, it'll be just the thing, you know."

"Ah," sighed Mrs. Steinhardt, "but it has been a sore trouble and grief to all of us. Emmanuel, my husband, has not been the same man since."

"Well, Sally," said her brother, "his having to stump up the £20,000 may have partlins what to do with that."

"But," said she, without heeding the interruption, "he won't hear of black either. So I suppose we must wait the seven years before we can show our respect for poor Paul."

This conclusion of the whole matter was certainly ludicrous. To many it may seem more—even frivolous and unfeeling. Frivolous, somewhat, it may have been; but I, who know Mrs. Steinhardt's warmth of attachment and generosity of feeling, am sure it was prompted by nothing but the usual feminine exceeding sense of propriety.

In a little while Miss Lacroix returned, with apology for her withdrawal.

"I had a little of headache," said she.

I now saw more clearly the encroachments which grief, and what I cannot describe by other words than "anxious waiting," had made on a young life which would, unoppressed, I was sure, have been so full of spirit and mirth. I longed there and then with an earnest desire that I might do something to brighten her life, to remove the weight of uncertainty and grief which burdened it and preyed upon it.

But I had little further opportunity for talk with her that night. In a few minutes Mr. Steinhardt returned. We heard then what were the casualties resulting from the falling of the belltower. A horse had been killed, as also had been a sow with her litter; and two pigs had been so injured, that the butcher had to be summoned. We were now invited into the smoking-room; but Mr. Birley rose and said he must be going; he would smoke his pipe on the way home "wi' th' parson."

"Parson smokes, I suppose?" said he, laying his hand on my shoulder.

So he and I departed together. The valley was asleep under a white pall of fog; but the weird

tongues of flame still flickered on the slope and ridge behind and beyond us (from coke-ovens, my companion explained), and the tall chimneys dreamily and intermittently smoked. The great chimney of the chemical works, however, emitted not so much smoke as a thin pinkish vapour, which stole away imperceptibly over the neighbourhood to poison all green things, and to filter through the cracks and crevices of doors and windows, to trouble sleepers with lethargy and headache.

"By George!" exclaimed my companion. "He'll get fined again some day. Paul used to be always at him about it. Poor Paul!"

So ended my first evening in Timperley—a memorable evening for me. I had made the acquaintance of one whom I have reason now to call as dear a friend as I have ever known, and as good a man as fortune has ever neglected, and of another who is now the dearest of all earth's creatures to me.

—:o:—

CHAPTER II.

LACROIX AND DE LACROIX.

MANY of my readers may be disappointed that I should have said so little about Miss Lacroix. Perhaps I ought to have said more. I do not know how other writers who narrate their story really concerning themselves (*qui de se fabulam narrant*) and in their own proper persons—I do not know how they may feel about it, but I must confess that I am reluctant to take into my confidence "the world and his wife" (if I should be so lucky as to find that interesting impersonal pair among my readers) concerning the most privately treasured of my recollections. Yet I may promise, I think, that as my story goes on I shall omit to tell nothing, however private, which may serve the purpose of my story. It should go without saying that I at least thought Miss Lacroix beautiful, and I had sufficient reason later to believe that in this I was but thinking as others did. The women, indeed, of the neighbourhood, rich and poor alike, who

were themselves plain-faced and destitute of shape, were shocked that she possessed a figure, and seemed to think that there must be something uncanny, if not diabolical, about her dark and foreign type of beauty which made men admire it so; I am not sure that Mrs. Steinhardt herself had not some such suspicion.

But though I was from the first, of course, very much impressed by Miss Lacroix's beauty, what attracted me to her more and more as the weeks went by was that overlaid expression I have already tried to describe, which seemed to ask for sympathy and help, and which took strong hold of my curiosity as well as of my interest. As we saw more of each other, and were more at ease with each other, I observed that this expression was habitual, and it became to me more clearly definable. She would look through it sometimes at me with a wistful look of appeal or inquiry. She seemed, I thought, several times as if she would take me into her confidence; and I found at length that it was not mere conceit of myself or of my office made me think so.

I frequently looked in upon the ladies at Timperley Hall, and took a four-o'clock cup of tea with them (not, however, to the neglect of other, if less pleasant, parochial visitations). During these visits we talked without that constraint which somehow Mr. Steinhardt's presence imposed upon us. Miss Lacroix and I agreed in our opinions concerning the ruthlessness with which Lancashire pushed on its industrial way; we often astonished poor Mrs. Steinhardt (sometimes even ourselves) by the warmth with which we would discuss the outrage done to man and Nature.

One afternoon we talked thus. It was well on in spring-time; the stream was running full, and all Nature, in spite of drawbacks, was striving to look green. I told them how I had that morning stood by the little plank-bridge just below Timperley Hall, looking across at the dreadfully lumbered little peninsula on which the ruined spinning-mill stood, when there turned up at my elbow an old man whom I knew by sight as an ex-handloom weaver.

"A fine brook that, parson," he said.

"Yes," said I, suiting my reply to what I thought his persiflage; "what a pity no trout seem to know of it."

"Ah, but," said he, sadly, "there were trout in it wonst; though there's been none for mony a day. Trout! Aw defy

onything to live in that, w'out gettin' cured first, like a red herrin' or a sallymander! There were a lad drownded like as it might be this spring, and he were never found till like as it might be next back-end, down theer in that mud. He were not gone at all, but he were cured thro' and thro'; black, mon,—black!"

This I told; and then I continued:—"Drowning, they say, is an easy death; but to drown in such a stream as that seems horribly repulsive. I fancy no one would care to commit suicide in it."

I perceived my stupid blunder as soon as I had spoken. I had not thought that what I said could be taken as "allusive" to the disappearance of Mr. Lacroix.

"Excuse me," said Miss Lacroix, rising hurriedly, "I do not feel very well. Do not come, Mrs. Steinhardt; I shall get better by myself."

I, of course, made apology to Mrs. Steinhardt for my stupidity.

"Yes," said she; "you see she can't bear any kind of allusion to her father's end. She told me soon after she came here (she couldn't, you know, go on living in that big house up there all by herself)—she told me a strange dream she had once or twice when her father was missing—the strangest thing, but I scolded her so, she has never said another word to me about it. Still, I fancy she thinks a great deal about her father, though she does not say much. They were rare fond o' one another."

That very evening I unexpectedly learned from Miss Lacroix herself what that strange dream was. I was returning by moonlight from the house of a parishioner along that same road which first brought me upon the valley. A railway engine in the distance was uttering a long-drawn whistle, and the great ventilating cowl of the ruined mill was grinding painfully round with a sound of the most eerie melancholy, to bring change of air to rooms that no longer existed, as I descended the steep path towards the stream. Passing the pond on my right (which I before mentioned as reflecting the lighted windows of the many-storeyed mill), I observed a female figure, cloaked and hooded, standing on the margin of the pond, under one of the trees. I paused a minute, while my heart beat with apprehension, and then I passed through a gap in the fence and approached. The figure turned quickly, as if impatient at the intrusion, and in the pale moonlight I recognized the face of Miss Lacroix.

"Miss Lacroix!" I exclaimed. "You here!"

"Oh, Mr. Unwin," she began, in evident tension of feeling, "I could not rest indoors, and so I came down to see Uncle Jaques; I could not remain with him, and so I came out here to look at this, which always fascinates me. Look!"

I stood by her side and looked; this is what I saw:—An inverted reflection of the tall chimney of the chemical works which was emitting, as it often did late in the evening, its strange pinkish vapour; this vapour in the reflection looked as if it were slowly rising from the bottom of the pond, and, as its colour blended with the tints the water somehow took as the breeze ruffled it this way or that, produced the impression of a slowly simmering caldron of red, green, and copper-brown flame. This was so wonderfully weird a fancy that I confess I felt my skin creep. I turned my eyes away, and then looked again and again, but the impression was ever the same.

"It is indeed very strange!" I said.

"Is it not?" said she. "You see it also? Mr. Unwin," she went on, turning suddenly to me, and speaking with a vehemence which increased as the words came, "I have wished to tell you. You are a clergyman, and must hear me make my confession; and you will keep it secret to yourself. You have heard, perhaps, that my father—my dear father!—is thought to be dead, now just a year ago?"

"I have," said I.

"He went to London and to Paris on business, and he never came back. It happened while he was away that I lived all by myself at home. I slept sound that night without dreaming, when suddenly I had a dream. I saw vapour or flame slowly rising just like that,—I saw a man plunge into it, and I knew the man was my father,—I felt he was. I awoke at once all trembling and did not go to sleep again. That was all my dream."

"Are you quite sure," I said, "that you had not heard some one—Mrs. Steinhardt, for instance—suggest that he had been drowned, and then you went and dreamt of the peculiar appearance of this pond?"

"No, no, no!" she protested with rapid vehemence. "Did I not say that I dreamed it the very night on which all trace of him was lost from his hotel in London? Nobody thought then that he was not coming home soon. And I do not think I had noticed this pond then. I have dreamed the same dream several times since, but that may

be nothing at all. I shall very likely dream it to-night."

That made me shudder.

"But what," I said, "do you suppose, then, the dream means?"

"I do not know at all," she said. "I guess and guess till my head aches and whirls with guessing, but I can make for myself no certain opinion. I think sometimes that flames may be about his poor head because of his loss—you understand me?—or that he may have gone away for the time to some other place where they work in chemicals,—but I cannot, cannot believe he is dead!"

"Ah," I said, "you must not let a dream prey upon you so. Dreams"—I declared in my dull male ignorance of the mysteries that lie beyond the touch of all philosophy and science—"dreams are begotten of indigestion, or bad air, or an awkward position when asleep, or anything."

"Ah," she said, sadly, "I did not think *you* would refuse to believe me."

"My dear Miss Lacroix," I said, "it is not that I do not believe you, but that I would like you to relieve yourself from the power this has evidently over you. Come, you should go home now."

I turned away from the pond, and she followed me. We walked along in silence for some distance.

"Oh!" she exclaimed, at length, "I do long so very much to know what has really happened to my dear father,—my poor father!"

"I wish I could help you to find out," I said; "indeed I do. You may be sure I shall think of all you have told me, and shall try to discover anything more. I have friends in London who may be of use, if I may mention it to them."

"Oh, certainly," she answered. "You are very kind. *Bacon's Hotel, Great Queen Street*, is where he was last heard of."

At a certain corner where the lane to Timperley Hall diverged from the way through the village, she insisted on parting from me. I let her go with little hesitation, for I knew there was no fear of her being molested: she would pass a public-house on her way, but I had never seen a villager quarrelsomely or uproariously drunk; ale, which seemed to be the liquor commonly consumed, only had a gentle soddening effect.

I had no sooner, however, seen her disappear round the corner of the lonely lane than I determined to follow her,—not to disturb her with my presence, but merely to have the delight

of seeing her, though at a distance, and the satisfaction of knowing that she would reach Timperley Hall in peace. I moved quietly in the shadow, watching her tall figure pass steadily on in the moonlit middle of the lane. I followed her to the gate of Timperley Hall, and waited there till I heard her footstep at the door, and heard the bell ring,—then I returned to the village.

It may be presumed that while I smoked my post-coenal pipe I thought over the strange scene at the pond, and all that Miss Lacroix had said. It was certainly very mysterious, but all the conclusion I could reach concerning it that night was a resolve to go and look at the pond by day.

I went in the morning and discovered how the strange tints of the water were produced. The pond was fed by a runlet, which flowed at the bottom of the bank on one side of the lane called by the name of Lacroix ("Lacroiks," the natives called it after their uncompromising Lancashire fashion). This lane, I had already learned, had been in other days the private carriage-drive of the first Lacroix (before a Steinhardt had been heard of) from his fine mansion to his dye-works and his model farm. The mansion, with its noble rookery, had long ago become the prey of the omnivorous speculative builder; the model farm had disappeared, all but the farmhouse which, squeezed into a sordid corner of the spreading village, was now let out in tenements; a Steinhardt now reigned in the Lacroix dye-works, and, in his scorn of the past, was in the habit of "tipping" his aniline refuse down among the tree-roots of the cherished avenue, narrowing more and more the already constricted channel of the little stream, and poisoning and discolouring the one clear flow of water in the whole neighbourhood. This it was which washed colour into the pond and gave it its varying tints.

I stood thus in some doubt and great indignation—doubt whether Miss Lacroix's dream might not after all be capable of as simple an explanation as I had found for the tints of the pond, and indignation at what I saw around me. I had never before ventured into the Lacroix lane; I now passed under its wretched dying trees, along the brink of its cinder-mud, ploughed a foot deep into ruts by lumbering coal-carts and waggons, and fancied it metamorphosed back into the private, shady, well-kept avenue of the first Lacroix. I had walked almost the whole

length of the lane when I met Mr. Birley, Mrs. Steinhardt's brother "Jim."

"Ah, there you are," he called cheerily, when he espied me, "I was just coming to look you up and take you round a bit: there's not much 'biz' doing, and so I've taken a holiday."

After greeting, I gave vent to the indignation of which I was full. We returned along the lane.

"Well," said he, laying his hand on my shoulder, "it's not nice, of course"—standing and surveying the lane—"but it's not for you or me to mend it; though I'm joint guardian with 'Manuel of Paul's girl" (he meant Miss Lacroix), "I've nothing to do with the property, and 'Manuel, you see, can't bear to spend the brass, and doesn't care a—well, a button—for Paul's family history. Poor Paul! he was a good chap. I suppose the name Lacroix is done for, and it has been what you learned fellows would call historical."

I asked what he meant. He stopped and pointed up the lane away from Timperley.

"You mightn't believe it," said he; but if you follow this lane right out to the end you'll get to the Bastille." (The dear old gentleman called it "*Bastile*.")

I looked at him: I failed to comprehend.

"You don't mean," I said, "the famous French Bastille?—the fortress-prison of Paris?"

"That's it," said he. "You've read, I suppose, in your history-books, of the taking of the Bastille, and the man that was governor at the time, De Lacroix?—that's the family. The poor old fellow was killed in the streets, I believe."

Thus he went on, with much fulness of irrelevant detail. I gathered these facts of consequence which I here set down:—At the time of the great emigration of French nobility to this country, a member of the De Lacroix family found his way to Lancashire with one or two dependents, a packet of jewels, and some scientific learning, and without his aristocratic prefix "*de*." He prospected about a little, and at length invested the money he got for his jewels in the Turkey-red and Indigo dye-works of Timperley. He prospered. He was one of the first to apply chemical science to the manufacture of dyes. He made a large fortune and became the great man of the neighbourhood. He had, however, a family of four sons, who gave him great trouble. They almost ruined their father, and quite broke his heart before their several courses of extravagance and debauchery came to an end. The eldest,

Paul's father, drew up just in time, married, and settled down to the business; another broke his neck in a steeple-chase; the third died of *delirium tremens*, or worse; and the fourth still existed, for he could scarcely be said to live: he was the tongue and limb tied paralytic, known as old Jaques, who inhabited the little octagonal house near the pond, which had been the lodge of his father's model farm. Paul had wished him to make his house his home, but he had insisted on settling down there. The two dependents, who had come to Timperley with the first Lacroix, had also been pursued by a malignant fate. Their representative was now to be found in the old man who looked after Jaques, and who might be met with any day going round the neighbourhood with a barrow of shell-fish.

This sad and fateful story lay heavy on my mind and heart for the rest of the day. In the evening I took down the first volume of Carlyle's "French Revolution," and read with new interest the wonderful passages in which he describes the taking of the Bastille by the mob, and the part which the old officer of the fortress played in its hopeless defence.

After that I sat down and wrote to a pair of London friends, asking them to make certain inquiries concerning Mr. Lacroix.

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CHAPTER III.

A MAN WITH A MISSION.

I HAD in all this abundant food for rumination during the next two or three weeks. But I had little time for rumination and no time at all for visits to Timperley Hall until Whitsuntide was past. Whitsuntide is the great festival in the Lancashire Calendar. Then mills and pits are idle for a week, and the workpeople have a spell of serious enjoyment, and wearing of new summer clothing, for which money has been saved from Christmastide or earlier. Some go on jaunts to the seaside for the week or for a day or two; but the recreations

and dissipations of the multitude are those connected with the Sunday schools, which are gigantic and popular institutions. The time and attention (often to little purpose) that clergymen are expected to give to them can hardly be conceived by those who hold cures in the south. One day there is a grand procession round the parish of scholars and their friends arrayed in their new finery, accompanied by flaunting banners and a blatant brass band, and headed by their clergymen. The procession halts at fixed points, forms into mass, and sings hymns, led by the brass band, while the banners take up positions to display their hideous devices and pictures. For another day a short excursion in waggons, with tea or milk and buns, and games are arranged for the benefit especially of the younger scholars; and for the third day a long railway excursion for the others. All these arrangements I had to undertake (some of them much against the grain, I confess; for I prefer to go through the parish as through life, unaccompanied by instruments of brass)—to undertake alone, along with all the duties more properly parochial and clerical, for the rector was still too ill to attend to anything.

For three weeks or so, therefore, I had no time to ruminate upon extraneous matters, and no time to spend at Timperley Hall. But I then made an acquaintance that considerably influenced the later events of my story—Mr. Freeman, the minister of a quaint little Dissenting Chapel in the village. We encountered first on the day of the procession in the Lacroix lane. He was marching along from the opposite direction to us at the head of his modest and silent troop. The lane was narrow. He halted, took off his hat, and smiled (while I could do no less in return), and he and his people (some of them with relutance, I have no doubt) stood aside to let our noisier and more imposing procession pass. That was our introduction. When the Whitsuntide matters were all disposed of, he called on me one evening to ask me to be chairman at a lecture he was about to deliver in the little public hall of the village on some point of the Land Question. I was somewhat taken aback by his request, and I suppose I showed that I was.

"You are surprised, I daresay, Mr. Unwin," said he, with a little constrained laugh (he was a bright, genial little man, with a big red beard). "I will explain why I ask you: because, I understand, you, like myself,

come from the south, where pure streams and clear skies and healthy trees may be seen, but especially because I believe you are the only man in the neighbourhood who holds something like the same opinions as I do; my friend, Mr. Birley, has told me of the talks he has had with you about the way our Lancashire friends treat Nature."

"Your friend Mr. Birley," I exclaimed.

"Yes," said he, with a comical twinkle in his eye, "Mr. Birley and I meet not on theological, but on simple human common ground, and he is the friend of everyone who knows his good heart."

I began to like my visitor. I agreed to act as his chairman, and we then settled down to talk. I soon found that, unfortunately for himself, he was a man with a mission—his mission being to convince the stiffnecked people of Lancashire that their industrial methods, which up till lately have brought so much grist to their mills, were altogether wrong; that until they learned reverence for Nature they would know nothing of Art, and until they knew something of honest Art their work would be without value, and (as they are beginning to find) would not even sell.

"Do you find," he asked, "these Timperley parishoners to your liking?"

I replied that at present I could answer the question better if it were inverted; I did not think the Timperley parishioners liked me; they seemed to regard me with suspicion—"as they regard Steinhardt," I said, "as a stranger and foreigner."

"Ah, well," said he, "they have reason for suspicion of foreigners. Most of the young men in Lacroix and Steinhardt's laboratory—I suppose I ought to say Steinhardt's alone now—and all the pattern-drawers of his print-works are German or French. Lacroix and Steinhardt have the present deplorable condition of this valley to answer for, and, believe me, the people understand that better than you may think. Steinhardt gives them employment, and so they hold their tongues, but they—well, I must say it—they hate him with their characteristic, stolid, watchful hatred. Steinhardt would have a very bad quarter of an hour if there ever came a strike among them. But," said he, noticing my silence and astonishment, "we're getting rather serious. Let me put another question to you. How do you like Lancashire institutions? — processions, for instance?" And he laughed his peculiar cheery laugh.

I answered, "Not at all."

"Nor I much," said he; "you see we cannot show up well. But I prefer at all times a procession of one, or at most of two."

On the evening of the lecture I took my place on the platform in a considerable flutter of nervousness. There was a large attendance of work-folk, with a fair sprinkling of well-to-do people from the neighbourhood, brought together, I suppose, as much by curiosity to see two parsons of conflicting creeds together as by interest in the subject of the lecture. I observed on a back-seat Mrs. Steinhardt and Frank, Miss Lacroix, and our friend Mr. Birley. Steinhardt himself was not there. On rising I was astonished to find myself greeted with rounds of applause, and on explaining in a few words how I came to be where I was, I was cheered with such hearty vociferation, that I concluded I had become, without knowing it, a popular personage. I accepted the explanation Mr. Freeman gave me afterwards:—"It was a brave and risky thing to do, you know, to appear with me; and these Lancashire folk above all things admire a bit of pluck against odds." The lecture was begun, and as it went on I was interested to see how its points were taken and applauded by a few intelligent looking young women, especially, who, I discovered later, sat at the feet of the genial Freeman. I soon, however, was myself occupied in listening.

The more interesting part of the lecture, after the manner of the lecturer's master, Mr. Ruskin, had only the remotest bearing upon the subject announced. It aroused my sympathies greatly, and it held the attention of the audience, whether they liked it or not. It was a picture of Timperley and its life, from the lecturer's point of view, and I must attempt a summary, since it affects the development of my story.

He said that, of course, those who had been brought up in Timperley as it now was, would not be able to understand how painfully it struck those like himself (with a side-glance at me) who had come from a region unblest with such tokens of prosperous industry as were apparent in Timperley, and who could judge, from its poor battered and draggled remains of beauty, how charming a valley this had once been.

"Ee! that it wuz!" cried an old voice.

It had been finely wooded, as was evidenced by the remains of great oaks and beeches that had

been found imbedded in the stream, which was now a filthy ditch. Where now were the trees? Thriftless lords of the manor had in past days, no doubt, cut down many, but they had planted others for their own sakes. Where were they? Let them go for answer to those who caused inexcusably bitter smoke, and unutterably poisonous chemical exhalations to pour from their great chimneys. The few tall beeches in front of Timperley Hall (said he) are all that remain of the many magnificent trees of a recent past; but even they, at this season, when they should be decked in gorgeous green, are extremely ill-clad; their top branches are quite bare—they are prematurely bald, in fact, and give one the impression of shivering under their rags of foliage—they are dying of slow poison like the rest. Yet they are a mighty contrast to the trees round about of a later generation—stunted things that will never know a healthy maturity; that have long been smitten with death, but that cheerfully strive to deck themselves with foliage as the season comes round. Their persistent attempts would be comical (said he) if they were not so piteous; they can only manage to clothe the trunk with a few fluttering shoots; their limbs must perforce remain entirely bare. Still, even their condition is not quite so lamentable as that of many other trees here, there, and everywhere around, which year in year out wear the same wintry look, which are not in mercy hewn down, but which gradually, as dry twigs or branches drop or are broken off, either by storm or by mischievous youth, and as the bark peels, assume the skinned, bleached, and abbreviated appearance of clothes-props. And they are thus allowed to stand to rot and rot, till they fall under an extra push or a puff of wind. So, that summer is within a calculable distance when the trees of Timperley will all stand naked in the sight of Heaven (all; for the wretched little saplings that strive to be green every year will never grow to be trees)—grisly skeletons, with gaunt arms outstretched in steady, silent appeal against their destroyers.

There was no cheering—the audience sat fixed and mute.

"But," he went on, with some passion of utterance, "this is not all, nor the worst. I might speak of other ways in which inanimate Nature—poor Nature, that cannot speak for herself—has been disgraced, abused, and destroyed; I leave them alone—I pass on to something which is,

after all, of more consequence. If I offend some I cannot help it. It is always true that, if Nature is outraged, she exacts vengeance — a slow vengeance, perhaps, but, unmistakably, vengeance. You have made of your beautiful valley, or have permitted it to become, a horrible wilderness of what is called manufacturing prosperity. You have sold your birthright—for what? For things you do not need, and are none the better for—for finery to put on your backs, pianos to put in your parlours, watches to put in your pockets, and food to put in your stomachs that does not feed you so well as your old Lancashire fare. You have sold for these things the beauties of Nature, your own health, and the souls and bodies of your children. You know as well as I do that, with work at the mills and in the pits, our women are almost unsexed." (Murmurs of disapprobation and resentment; some rose and went out; but he went on.) "Boys and girls at school are eager for the time to come when they may leave, that they may go and 'addle' money, and be their own masters and mistresses. Most of your households have more money coming in than I have, but I would not exchange with any of you—no, not with the biggest money-maker of the village."

(Whispers of "Steenhardt.")

"I had rather be a Dorsetshire labourer on ten shillings a week, with wholesome nature around me, gentle beasts, and the fresh green of the country, than one of you with your two or three pounds coming in every week!"

The meeting broke up in some disorder. Mr. Freeman was pale, but composed; he had uttered what was in him, for once. An old fellow came up to him.

"Weel, shake honds, parson. Thoo'st hit hard, but aw believe thoo'rt right" ("reet" he pronounced the word); "aw would rather ha' th' owd days. But it's a' them Steenhardts and foreigners."

This, we found afterwards, was a pretty general opinion. It was Steinhardt and his like who had brought them and their valley to such a pass that a stranger had some ground for talking to them as he did.

CHAPTER IV.

MY CHAIRMANSHIP HAS RESULTS.

THIS adventure with Mr. Freeman had results that I had not foreseen; but that I might have guessed had I considered sufficiently the situation in which I had placed myself—results which at the time caused me some anxiety, yet which, in the end, proved much to my advantage. Mr. Steinhardt, of course, heard of it, and took an early opportunity of calling me to task with characteristic German—I may perhaps say, Bismarckian—*brusquerie*. I had been asked to dine at Timperley Hall. He said little during dinner, but I found his eye on me several times. When the ladies withdrew from table, he sent Frank after them. Then he opened upon me at once.

"What the deuce, Mr. Unwin, is this you've been doing with that ass, Freeman?"

I stared in speechless surprise—less at the actual question than at its dictatorial tone. His complexion was usually very ruddy; it now became a curious purplish-red, even to his eyes and his bald crown, as if he had been dipped in a vat of his choicest dye.

"You mustn't do that kind of thing, you know; you'll spoil your chances in the Church; and, more than that, I can't have you and him disturbing my workpeople, and setting them against me. I can't say anything to him, but I must tell you I can't have it; it won't do at all."

"I don't know," I answered, "what right you have, Mr. Steinhardt, to talk to me in this fashion."

I was angry. He moved about the glasses and decanters near him.

"What right? Your salary comes out of my pocket; your rector can't pay it."

"That," said I, "is a matter between you and the rector, sir."

"Perhaps it is. But I want to tell you that I must be master in this village; and if you are bent upon interfering with me, or between me and the people, you shall go away—that's all. You keep to your preachings and your visitings and your tea-meetings," he continued, in

a tone, doubtless, meant to be placatory, "and you will do very well."

"I take it to be my duty, Mr. Steinhardt," I replied, "to concern myself with whatever affects the welfare of the people; and, to my mind, the dreadful condition of the valley, and——"

"Oh, d—d sentimental nonsense!" he exclaimed. "The valley is here for us to make money out of the best way we can."

"It is, of course, of no consequence that I don't agree with you," said I; "but as to what I shall think or say on these or any other matters, I can certainly take no orders from you, sir. You must excuse my saying it."

"Very well." He sat a moment in silence, fingering his glass; he seemed not to have expected this conclusion. Then he rose and said, as if he were quite unconscious of having treated me with rudeness, "We had better join the ladies."

"If you will excuse me," said I, "I think I must say good-night."

"Eh?" He looked at me in some surprise. "Oh, you should talk to the women a little while at any rate. But just as you please."

The invitation was exasperatingly unconcerned, but, thinking this was but his habitually churlish Teutonic way, and that if I did not appear in the drawing-room the ladies might be distressed, I accompanied him.

Both of the ladies glanced at me rather curiously; probably I showed signs of discomposure. Soon Mr. Steinhardt withdrew to his study and his pipe.

"You've been having words with Emmanuel, Mr. Unwin," said Mrs. Steinhardt, almost as soon as her husband was gone. "It's all about that dreadful lecture affair, I suppose. He thinks you've gone against him in it, and Emmanuel can't bear to be gone against." (The good lady always pronounced her husband's name with a lofty sense of its scriptural prestige.)

"I do not see," said I, still rather sore, "that Mr. Steinhardt should expect to have his own way everywhere and in everything, any more than another man."

"Mr. Steinhardt," said Miss Lacroix, "is now alone in his authority, now that father is gone, and he is by his nature what you would say a despot—oh, yes, dear Mrs. Steinhardt, he is—if anyone is not obedient to him he is not nice at all. He said hard, rude, cruel things to you, Mr. Unwin,—indeed, yes," said she, in answer to my look of surprise, "I know he did; I felt him saying them all the time;

—and besides, I saw him saying them with his eyes all dinner-time. But you must not trouble about his words; they come from his nature, which he cannot help, I suppose."

"What things, to be sure, you do say, Louise!" exclaimed Mrs. Steinhardt, "and what eyes you have got! My word!"

I cannot but confess that the interest Miss Lacroix thus manifested in what touched me awoke in me sensations, I may even say vague hopes, of a very pleasant and consoling kind. I dreamed bright dreams that night, which hung about me during the next day, but in the evening they were dispelled somewhat rudely by a note from the bishop, requesting me to call upon him, and by a message from the rector, desiring me to call on him.

I went first to the bishop. My interview with him was more agreeable than I had anticipated; the bishop is notoriously a prelate with liberal views. Mr. Steinhardt had written to him, giving him his version of my adventure with Mr. Freeman. I thereupon gave my version, which his lordship listened to with a smile of tolerance for my thoughtless youth. He dismissed me with some excellent prelatical advice to be in my future conduct and speech, "wise as the serpent, and harmless as the dove"; to avoid giving offence to so great a man as Steinhardt, and to be careful to associate myself as little as possible with the heretical Freeman, or with Freeman's opinions.

"People," said he, "will be sure to say, if they find you at one with his social ideas, that you are also at one with him in theological and religious matters; and that would not do, you know."

I went with a tolerably light heart to the rector. He was still in bed. My short interview with him was not pleasant. I must say this in his excuse, that he was worn by a long illness, and that he could not help being a cleric of the dull and prejudiced type. Besides, he had a nagging wife and a large family, with a small stipend to satisfy their wants, and, therefore, could not afford to risk giving anything like offence to the chief man in his parish. The words we exchanged were warm; but they do not concern this story except in their result. He wished, he urged, he almost ordered me to cease all recognition in any way of the existence of the man Freeman; I refused to give any pledge to that effect; and so I was given to understand that I would not be wanted in the parish after the six months for which I had been at first engaged.

It was only then, when my departure from Timperley seemed imminent (I had already been almost four months in the place) that I began to suspect how very much my hopes and affections had entangled themselves with the haunting sadness, the unconscious grace and beauty of Miss Lacroix. What likelihood was there now, if there ever had been any, of a poor curate who had already done something to discount his chances of preferment, —of my being more than an agreeable and tolerably sympathetic acquaintance of a month or two, of my hearing her say more than "so very sorry, indeed, that you are going," and of thus finding the episode closed? No likelihood at all there seemed. And yet so much may happen in two short months. I have to admit that, even in the midst of serious work (of writing a sermon, for instance), vain, wild thoughts would arise in me of commending myself to the young lady by some great service — by, perchance, discovering her father, or at least finding out for certain what had become of him (although I had yet had no word from the two friends whom I had asked to make inquiries in London). But these foolish, fruitless longings were soon crowded aside by the excitement of events.

A strange thing happened which was a direct result of my hitherto luckless adventure with Mr. Freeman. I found that affair had commended me to the favourable attention of all types of dissenters in the village; one mark of this favour I especially appreciated, as all clergymen would—the increased congregations I had at church, on Sunday evenings particularly.

"I almost regret, for my own sake, you know," Freeman said to me one day, with a laugh, "that I asked you to be my chairman at that direful lecture. I find you are taking many of my congregation from me; not altogether, though, I must say that for myself. But they do their duty by me in the morning, and then seem to take their pleasure with you in the evening."

Of those who thus forsook Mr. Freeman, I noticed a remarkable group of working-folk, whom he had pointed out to me as the most closely cohering, and the most curiously inter-related congeries of families in the village (where there is an excess of cousinship). They were steady, stolid, shrewd people, very comfortably off, yet all of whom, male and female, worked at the loom or the chemical vat. My attention was first attracted to them by their taking up a good seat well forward, and refusing

to budge when the butcher's family (who paid for it) came in, and by their evidently being quite unused to the order of service in church. The Prayer Book was a maze to them, and the rising up and sitting down constantly took them by surprise. The family, I learned, had rigorously dissented for generations.

At a special Flower Service (for which few flowers could be gathered in Timperley) they were not in their accustomed pew. The church was densely crowded—more crowded, I think, because the fact and the reason of my speedy departure from Timperley had somehow got abroad. (The rector's wife had an active tongue, and may be credited with having first made the fact public.) At the end of the week, however (on Friday night, I think), a message came to me when I was in bed, requesting me to visit at once a man who was dying—one of the sons of this interesting family. I dressed and went.

I heard sounds of wailing and lamentation from the house before I entered. I passed into the kitchen, a clean, bright room, in which the men of the family sat smoking in various absorbed attitudes, oppressed with silence and sleep. One of the women stooped over a pan on the fire, while the old mother, in a firm, clear voice directed her operations. She turned to me, saying merely—

"He's upstairs. He wants bad to see yo', but at present he's leet i' th' yed" (light in the head).

Upstairs I found the dying man in the smaller of the two bedrooms—for warmth. That sick-room, as it then appeared to me, will not easily be forgotten. At that dead hour of night, when "the very houses seemed asleep," and even the tall chimney of the chemical works had ceased to emit its tinted vapours, the gas flared full in the little room, and six persons, men and women, were round the bed where the poor fellow lay in the last extremity of delirious helplessness, soaked in perspiration. Near him stood my friend Freeman. At the head of the bed hung two watches; on the whitewashed wall ticked a loud Dutch clock. Over the bottom rail of the bed leaned the wife in despair, moaning at intervals in a low voice her husband's name. Behind her was the man's sister preparing a poultice over the fire.

I learned in a few words from Freeman that the poor fellow had been employed for years at the chemical works, where he had contracted ulceration of the lungs; on Sunday night he had

stood in the doorway of the crowded church, had caught cold, and had come home to the bed from which he would never rise again.

While we spoke he was seized with a fit of violent delirium, in which he had to be restrained from getting out of bed. The women began to weep and wail, and the old mother ascended from the kitchen and adjured him, "Pray, Dick, pray!" and then turned to us with—"Will none o' yo' parsons pray for my lad?"

Soon he calmed down again into a more lucid interval. While he lay speechless, and a neighbour by the bed kept moistening his dry, cracked lips with a rag soaked in brandy and water, he gazed around him, and at last fixed his eyes on me, and essayed to speak; but no words came. This prostration and silence continued for some time. Now and again the head of the family would ascend from the kitchen (in his stockings, least he should make a noise), and stand in solemn silence, with inquiring eyes on his son. He would stand so still and retired that his presence was forgotten till the gulp of a big sob was heard, and the loose back of his large waistcoat was seen disappearing round the door. At length the son found speech.

"Father," he said, when the old man was about again to withdraw, "bide."

He then signified that all the others should leave the room except Freeman and myself. When they were gone, he motioned his father to his pillow. The old man went.

"Ha'e you summat to say, Dick?" He nodded, "Mun I raise you up?"

He was raised and propped up with pillows. He asked for a drink, and was given some whisky and milk.

"I am a dying mon," he began; "I know I am." His eyes, glazed with disease and want of sleep, turned wildly about; his head drooped; and his damp, thin fingers (still discoloured with dye) clawed at the bedclothes. He resumed, fixing his eyes on me,—"I mun confess summat; I hope God'll forgive me. I had nought to do wi' it; what for should I? He was aye good to me. I had nought to do wi't, I tell you!"

"No, lad," said the father, to soothe him; "thoo hadna."

"Weel," said he, "dunnot say I had, because I hadna. Wasna I on night shift? That was all. I took Jim's place; he wanted to go whoam to wife—in bed wi' babby. That was it." He muttered on some other phrases, while he turned his eyes about

as if lost; his recollection was wandering. He resumed with energy, "They came right in, speaking loud and angry. *He* walks up to thing, and lifts lid. '*I knowed it!*' says he. '*But yo' needna let a' th' world know it!*' says th' other. '*This shan-not be!*' says he."

The poor fellow was growing terribly excited; every word was uttered with fierce emphasis and wild gesture. His eyes were fixed on vacancy, and, in my reflex excitement, I fancied I saw the interior of the colour-shed, with its vague tinted vapours, through which loomed the figures of two quarrelling men, whom I tremblingly watched in imagination by the side of this dyed demon of the vat. The man grew so excited, and we were so engrossed with his revelation, that he had risen to his knees in bed before we could prevent him. He continued his fierce disjointed utterances.

"'*We mun ha' no more of it!*' says he. *He* leans ower! Ah, Lord! he wants to spill it! A—h—h!"

With a wild leap he was standing up in bed, and fiercely imitating the action of a man stooping and tipping or throwing some heavy body. We were so transfixed with surprise and horror, that we could not stir a hand to restrain him. He looked like a weird corpse suddenly raised from the dead to a grotesque, galvanic life. What chiefly seized my attention was the black shadow on the wall of this delirious figure thus stooping with head and hands outstretched. The incident lasted but a moment, and then the poor man fell back on his pillows with distracted cries.

"Murder! Oh, my God! murder! An' I couldna speak! Nay, I couldna! But I'd nought to do wi't!—nought!"

Again he lay exhausted, and his relatives and neighbours came back hurriedly to his bedside to wail over him. He looked sadly but calmly on them, gasping in the last faint struggle of nature against dissolution . . . . And so he died, and the wailing broke out redoubled.

"He's gone, owd brid*!" cried the old mother, turning to her husband.

* * * *

Before Freeman and I left the house together to go out into the cool summer morning air, the old man said quietly to us, "I've seen for long he had summat on his moind, but what he means I conna tell; so we'd best ho'd our tongues, I think."

* *Old bird*, a term of endearment.

CHAPTER V.

EXHAUSTIVE SPECULATION.

IT is almost useless to attempt to describe the feelings of dread and horror with which I issued from the strange death-bed. On that fine, calm summer morning even there was no self-possessed seclusion of nature to which I could withdraw to lose in its sweet solace the visions of repulsive death which hung about me. I left Freeman at his own door, and wandered away in search of some spot in which distraction and calm might come. But the search was vain.

There are hours in everyone's experience when memory and imagination seems to turn sour; when hope of any satisfaction or joy in this world seems becoming only in a child or an idiot; —such were the hours of that summer dawn for me. I wandered about and around, like a lost spirit—"in dry places, seeking rest, and finding none"—up and down, scarce knowing where I went. At length, utterly exhausted, I returned to the village to my lodgings.

It was between five and six o'clock. The tall chimneys had begun to pour forth their volumes of black smoke to befoul and bepoison the air, which had cleared itself somewhat in the night. When I entered the village its pavements resounded with the clatter of clogs: the daily contingent of toil, which almost emptied the village of men and women, young and old, was drowsily marching out to its various stations. The men and lads on their way to Lacroix and Steinhardt's chemical works attracted most of my attention. They were of fearful and wonderful aspect; they were of brilliant colours curiously blent, or were wholly blue or green, or a fine Mephistophelean red; they were, indeed, quite "subdued to what they work in"—dyed even to the roots of beard and eyebrows. As I looked, I wondered whether the constant wearing of this engrained war-paint were not of itself enough to keep ever alive in these men, peaceful as they looked, fierce passions which in other men usually slumbered. An outbreak of savage nature among them in the mephitic vapours in

which they worked might be no very unusual thing: was it some such outbreak, ending in a fearful death for one of them, of which the dead man lying in that house with the white blinds drawn had been a terror-stricken witness, or had his confession been merely the raving of delirium—delirium which seemed in some measure to have been communicated to me, tired as I was with the excitement and with want of sleep?

When I reached my lodgings I went to bed, and slept for some hours. I awoke more myself, disposed to take a clearer and soberer view of things. Over my late breakfast I resolved what I would do. I, for my part, would say nothing of the confession heard in the night, until I could be sure it had some foundation in fact. This I would that morning try to discover in the village. I knew that any of the shopkeepers would be only too ready to welcome a gossip; for except at meal times, and in the evening, the village is nearly empty of customers. When I sallied out I found the streets, as I had expected, pervaded by that curious air of absence and expectation which characterised them the greater part of the day. The cottages were silent; if a door happened to stand open, I would get a peep into a clean kitchen with floor of flags, whitened and sanded, in which, perhaps, sat a woman with a baby in her arms, and with her eye on the street, or an old grandam smoking with her elbows on her knees, and with her eye on the street, waiting contentedly for dinner or for death.

At certain corners or at tally-shop doors were two or three women with the unfailing baby-in-arms, and with several children, either dragging at the maternal tail or playing in the gutter. Neither women nor children were very much washed, or dressed, or tied, or buttoned. The children seemed occupied to their own satisfaction, but the women appeared in an eternal state of transition, as if their meeting thus were merely by the way (although I knew it was their daily habit). Though they gossip by the hour they are always stirring either on this foot or on that, with the half-formed intention of next moment dissolving the seductive palaver and going home to prepare for the husbands and sons whom their wandering eyes see in fancy coming up the street. A grey gaffer or two crept along in the sun, with the air of whiling away the time till some event should come off. The shopkeepers were at their doors exchanging sententious remarks with some of the trapesing

women — remarks which they hushed as the parson went by.

I found one not thus engaged —the draper, a little middle-aged man, who bore the evidences of hard work in the mills from his earliest youth—in bow legs and a generally wizened look. He was the very man I would have chosen for my purpose. He had a feminine fondness for gossip, and he knew the affairs of everyone in the village and all that had happened for a generation or two. I had no difficulty in arriving quickly at the end I had in view. He already knew that I had been called up in the night to visit the dying victim of Applied Chemistry, and that Freeman and I had been with him till the end.

"Very delirious," said the draper, "I hear say he was—jabbered and rambled away about a' kinds o' stuff, and then slummered" (*slumbered*) "off again, I suppose? Yea; that's the way they do. Eh, dear! It's a bad business for the wife and the family. He was a good lad, very stiddy and kind to his wife and childer: brought up his childer so weel; he was getting them learned the piano. I suppose the wife'll go back to th' mill; and Mr. Steenhardt never sent to ask after him wonst, I believe."

"Are diseases like his," I asked, "often got at the chemical works?"

"Nay," said he, "I think not; the smells seem to agree wi' most folk pretty weel."

"But the work is very dangerous, is it not? Don't accidents often happen?"

"Yea; it is risky. When they work ower the vats, and the retorts, and things, they mun tie up their mouths and noses wi' a clout, and even wi' that they may sometimes get choked and overcome dwalmlike all at wonst wi' th' smell, or summat, and then they're a goner."

"Accidents often happen, then?"

"Weel, mon, they do and they don't. Mates, you see, are aye at hond. The lads often get an eye burnt, but they don't reckon much to that. See; there's a lad ower there by the beer-shop door."

I looked, and saw a sturdy fellow all red, with a white handkerchief tied round his head, under his cap.

"He's been two-three times like that,—wi' his eye burnt. Oh, yea; it's risky; but we don't often ha' a grit accident. The worst I remember was a lad on th' night-shift that fell in and was smothered; he was found in thing next morning. That was a bad business; a' th' hair was off, an' th' skin and flesh was——

but it mak's you feel queer; yea, I can see it do. It was a bad business."

"Very horrible," said I, while my heart thumped almost audibly. "How long was that ago?"

"Let me see. It's a matter, I do believe, o' fifteen year ago."

"I hope," said I, "a death of that sort doesn't often occur."

"Nay; or our folk, quiet as they are mostlins, might pull the whole menagerie down."

I was surprised to see the vindictive glitter that passed from the little man's eyes.

"Has there really," I asked with some constraint, "been any other death like that since the one you mention?"

"Nay; I conna remember one."

That was all I wanted, and I soon left the little draper. I went on to call on Freeman. I found him sitting with his pretty, pleasant wife at an early dinner. They invited me to sit down and partake. I declined, on the ground of having just had breakfast.

"I," said he, "have managed with more economy. This is my breakfast and dinner combined."

"I wished," said I, "to have a little talk with you."

"If," said he, "it is about that affair of the night, say on; I and my wife are one."

I then told him of my gossip with the draper and its purpose.

"You need not have gone to him," said he; "I could have told you that there has been no death of that sort since we have been here, and that's nearly five years. Of course, it's absurd to suppose that the death of fifteen years ago is the one poor Dick was thinking of. No; I've come to the conclusion that he had some hairbreadth escape from death in his mind, and that the rest was delirium."

"But, dear," said Mrs. Freeman, "don't you forget, both of you, that Dick's confession, according to himself, was of a murder, which has not been found out?"

"You are right, my dear," said he. "But, at the same time, there has no one been missed who could have been disposed of in that way. Two men, I remember, have disappeared, but they had nothing to do with chemicals, and they were last seen near that deep pond in the clough; it would be detective speculation thrown away to imagine how they could be done to death in a chemical vat. Come," said he, seeing my serious, anxious look, "let the matter alone; we can do nothing with it. The chemical works are an abomination, but the only recent death I can suspect them of is

that of an unfortunate dog; some one had dyed him a blazing scarlet; for awhile he slunk about the streets, an object of loathing to himself, and of terror, curiosity, and scorn to the whole dog-world; then he disappeared —withdrew, probably in shame and despair to that pond in the clough and put an end to the glaring anomaly of his existence. But, after all, I think the chief harm they do is to every green thing and to Steinhardt's reputation for honesty. I see this morning," he continued, turning and picking up the newspaper, "that he is again in court for infringement of some patent."

Our talk then turned on the former case of the same kind, the heavy damages paid, and the strange disappearance of Mr. Lacroix. I asked him if he had ever heard the romantic history of the Lacroix family. He knew all about it; he had heard it from Birley.

"And I always think," said he, "that Miss Louise is rather more like a De Lacroix than a Lacroix; she is made for higher spheres of life; she will not remain very long in this Nature-and-Art-forsaken valley."

I thought he looked rather meaningly at me, as if devining the state of my feelings. I know I blushed, at the same time that I felt a chill apprehension that the vain hopes and longings which came to me a dozen times a day, and which I waved aside as ridiculous folly, were in truth folly of the most boyish and ridiculous sort.

"She comes here sometimes," said he, "with our friend Birley." I made a mental note of the fact. "She is the last of the family, then," he continued after a pause; "and so a noble name is lost! Poor Lacroix! It is here in Timperley, as I fear it will turn out in the big world,—the Frenchman has laboured and the German has entered into his labours; the Frenchman has sown and the German reaps. And so the world goes on, and it is not always the best that wins."

I broached to him my hope of either finding the lost Mr. Lacroix, or at least of finding out what had become of him; and I told him I had written some weeks before to some friends, who, I had thought, might make inquiries for me in London, but that I had heard nothing from them, and that, therefore, I thought of going to London myself on that errand, as soon as my six months had expired. He shook his head.

"I fancy," said he, "all inquiries have been made. However, since it is desirable to find out, if possible, something for

certain"—he paused and looked at me—"I tell you what. We are going for our fortnight's holiday at the end of the month. I will gladly do what I can, if you like." (I wondered then why he should mention it as if it were my affair, but I understand now.) "In fact, amateur detection is rather a fad of mine," said he.

I agreed with him that it might, or might not, result in something—a very safe concord; and so it was settled that in less than three weeks he would be in London, doing his best to emulate Lecocq.

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CHAPTER VI.

A CRISIS.

I HAD tacitly assented to Freeman's suggestion that no more was to be thought or said of Dick's horrible pantomimic confession, but it impressed me as being too vivid to be lightly discarded as without any basis of fact. I continued to think of it very much. I thought of it more because, in spite of the unreasonableness of such a conjunction, and its manifest "waste of detective speculation" (as Freeman would have said), the vapours, so to say, of Louise's dream would persist in mingling, in my imagination, with the vapours of Dick's delirium. Could it really be that Mr. Lacroix had met his death in some such way? And if he had, how had he come by it?—and where? Was it even possible, in the mystery of things, that Lacroix had been smothered in one of his own vats? The complete Nemesis of such a fate had a wonderful fascination for me, the family becoming as good as extinct by the very means it had used to give itself local distinction, and to disgrace and destroy Nature—Nature's poisonous exhalations ruining the very family which had created them! I returned to the idea again and again, and again and again I frowned it aside as not less the emanation of a delirious brain than the dream of the young lady and the confession of the workman.

But a discovery I made about this time—trivial apparently, yet to me significant—fixed my idea more firmly in my imagination. One night while I sat thinking of my return to London I took up my "Bradshaw," and carelessly began noting the times of trains from the neighbouring large town to the metropolis. The lines of three companies passed through it, and I became interested in noting how the rivals ran fast and still faster trains against each other. In this survey my attention was fixed by a very small fact: one company (I had never travelled on its line, and so, I suppose, I had never noted the fact before) ran one of its two quickest trains so that it reached the neighbouring town about midnight—the only very quick train within two or three hours of that time. I found easy opportunity to test in some degree what significance this fact might have.

Early in the week following Dick's confession, Mr. Steinhardt had gone to London to attend his trial, in the Court of Queen's Bench, I think it was. He would be absent for more than a fortnight, and I had therefore many welcome chances of being in Miss Lacroix's company. Society about Timperley was very meagre and very dull; it was a long way from any centre of civilization, and Miss Lacroix seemed to pine and sicken in its smoke-and-toil-bound atmosphere, so Mrs. Steinhardt anxiously sought by any means to brighten those summer days for her young *protégée*. Thus it was, I think, that during that fortnight I received such invitations to Timperley Hall as I had never had before. I was asked several times to dinner, and was encouraged to find other and sundry occasions for calling.

On one of these occasions I found Miss Lacroix alone. She received me shyly, but with such evident pleasure that, if I had not come with another purpose, I fear I would have given utterance to such warm protestations as I had of late, oftener than once, had almost on my lips. After some casual remarks I began to work towards my purpose by alluding to Steinhardt's business in London.

"It will be a serious thing for him," said I, "won't it, if he should be so unsuccessful in his defence as your father was?"

"He will not be unsuccessful as poor father was," answered she, with a sad shake of her beautiful head; "Mr. Steinhardt is not scrupulous as father was; he tells falsehoods with rude simplicity, like his great chancellor, and so people think him to be all honest truth. He will

succeed in his case, I think—I have heard him talk it to Frank—and he will come back more despot than ever. Poor father!" She leaned back, and looked sadly out over the valley, from which rose the smoke and sound of its daily toil, fatigued and forced, I thought, on that warm summer afternoon.

"I have thought a great deal," said I, seizing the opportunity her exclamation afforded, "of that strange dream you told me of."

"Yes," said she, turning with sudden interest.

"Do you still dream it?" I asked.

"Yes, I do; but not often now."

"It is a very strange thing. Does the dream come at any particular hour of the night?"

"It does," said she; "and that, I daresay, makes me think more of it. It always comes two or three hours after I have gone to bed. I dream it, and then become wide-awake; and after I have lain awake a little I always hear the hall clock strike two. My room is over the hall."

"And the first night you had the dream,—do you think it came then about the same hour?"

"Yes," said she, "I think so. But"—and she leaned forward, eager and pale—"why do you ask me these questions? Have you found out something? from your friends in London, perhaps? You had heard nothing when last I asked you, I know. Tell me—have you heard something now?

"No, I am sorry to say, I have not. Still, I do not despair; I have a hope I may learn something soon."

"Oh, what?" she eagerly demanded.

"I think," said I, "you had better not ask me; it may only end in disappointment, and this matter already preys upon you too much."

"You are very kind to me," said she. My pulse beat tumultuously, and I was on the point of saying something rash concerning my devotion, when she added, almost as if she knew what I was thinking of, "But I can think of nothing else much—I can be interested in nothing else. It is very foolish of me, but I cannot help it. Mr. Steinhardt sometimes is rather rude to me about it. He wants me to marry Frank," said she simply; "but I do not wish to marry Frank, and Frank does not wish to marry me. I do not wish to think of marrying at all just yet."

"I suppose," said I, piqued and jealous, too, I dare say, "Mr. Steinhardt wants you to marry his son that he may keep

your father's money, which you will inherit, in his business."

"I do not think," said she with a smile, "that there is much now of poor father's money. Mr. Steinhardt reckons off it that £20,000 which, he says, father lost without any cause."

"But does Mr. Birley, your other guardian, agree to that fraud?—for fraud it is."

"I do not know," said she listlessly. "But I think dear Mr. Birley is somehow in Mr. Steinhardt's power; I think he fears to say much."

I am afraid I then began to look upon Steinhardt as my personal enemy, and to be alarmed at the influence he might yet exert upon my life. I became more obstinately resolved than ever to do what in me lay to clear up the fate of Mr. Lacroix, not only because I would be rendering a service to Louise, but because I would give Steinhardt a serious defeat in his projects if by any chance I should be able to prove his partner still alive. Suspicion hung about me that I would have no such chance as that, yet at the least I believed that I would be able to disconcert this Nebuchadnezzar of a German, who would have all men serve him. Even if the death only of Lacroix were proved, that would bring on a reckoning and a settlement of his affairs which, it seemed to me clear, Steinhardt wished to put off to as distant a day as possible. My resolution received soon a fresh stimulus.

Mr. Steinhardt returned from London resplendent with success and self-satisfaction. He had won his case. He had been able to lead the court to believe that he had found out for himself the chemical process for which the plaintiffs had taken out a patent, with this difference that he had employed a *wet* method, whereas they used a *dry* —or *vice versâ*; I do not remember which it was. The plaintiffs were going to carry their case to a higher court, but he did not care for that. He called together his friends and his neighbours to rejoice with him, of whom I was one; for since he had got the better of me over the lecture affair he had been as amicably disposed as before. The dinner was a very sumptuous affair, and Mr. Steinhardt thought himself so much master of the situation that, I think, he indulged rather more freely in wine than was his habit. In the drawing-room after dinner his eye was the brightest and his talk the loudest and most voluble. He watched his son paying gallant little attentions to a strange young lady, while Miss Lacroix was surrounded

by the beaus of the neighbourhood, and he called him, in audible asides, "Fool!"—"Idiot!"—"Blockhead!" At length he became so impatient that, shouting "Frank, I want you!" he strode out of the room. Frank at once rose and followed him in evident alarm.

After some time he returned, looking pale and agitated. He came up to me (I sat talking with Mr. Birley) and, to my great surprise, said,

"Mr. Unwin, the governor wants to speak to you in the dining-room." I had a disagreeable recollection of a former interview there, but before I could say anything he continued, "I'm afraid I've got you into a row, without meaning aught of the sort. The governor's always at me to—to make love to Louise; he wants me to marry her." (Mr. Birley shifted uneasily in his seat.) "That was what he called me out about just now. He jawed me, and I told him I didn't want to marry Louise. He got very angry, and then I said what was the use of my making love to a girl that was in love with somebody else. I shouldn't have said that, I know, but I was very riled. I am very sorry."

The hot suspicion now dawned on me that I was the fortunate "somebody else" of his legend. I felt I grew burning red. I scarcely heard what he said afterwards; but it was to the effect that his father angrily said he would put a stop to that, and dismissed him with the order to send me to the dining-room. Birley sat unusually silent and disturbed. I also was silent a moment. I turned to him.

"Do you think I ought to go?" I asked him.

"Yea, lad, go," said he, laying his hand on my shoulder, "and I'll go wi' tha."

We entered the dining-room together. Steinhardt stood on the hearthrug. He frowned and pulled his great moustache on seeing Birley with me.

"I wished to speak to Mr. Unwin privately, Jim," said he.

"Well," said Birley, "I've come to be a sort of interpreter, 'Manuel, lest you, being a foreigner like — leastways, not altogether English yet—mightn't understand some things an Englishman like my friend here would very likely say. You see, 'Manuel, for one thing you don't seem to understand that an English clergyman is not the flunkey you may get a pastor of the Fatherland to be. You mustn't say 'Come here!' and 'Do this!' or 'Don't do that!' without any rhyme or reason but your own high and mighty will. That may be Bismarckian,

'Manuel, but it's not English. An Englishman would say, 'You be d——d, sir! Who are you talking to? A dog at your heel?' as, I daresay, my friend here would say if he didn't happen to be a parson."

All this, I could see, was the rankest offence to Steinhardt; while Birley, unconscious of harm, went largely along.

"When you've quite done, Jim," said the brother-in-law.

"Eh?" said Birley, as if he caught faintly a distant interrupting sound.

"Perhaps, Mr. Birley," said I, "I had better hear what Mr. Steinhardt wishes to say to me."

"Yes, of course," said he, and imposed an unwelcome silence upon himself.

"I only wished to tell you, Mr. Unwin," said Steinhardt, looking hard at me, "since you have seen a good deal of my ward, Miss Lacroix" (Birley evidently chafed at that), "especially lately, I understand, and since it may have entered your head that some time she might make you a beautiful wife, I wish to tell you that you must give up thinking anything of the sort, because she is going to marry my son Frank."

"Oh, that be d——d for a tale, 'Manuel!" exclaimed Birley, before I could say a word.

"Will you be quiet, Jim?" said Steinhardt, with restrained voice, but glaring eyes, and that apoplectic, purplish flush suffusing head and face, which I had only seen once before.

"Nay, lad," said Birley; "that's a point on which I mun ha' my say. Before you tell anybody Louise is going to marry Frank, you must get the consent of at least three people—the girl herself, your son, and her other guardian, that's me." Steinhardt looked at him in unfeigned surprise, but he went on: "Your son, that's your affair, of course; but the girl, that's partly mine; and I shall not see Paul's Louise engaged to marry anybody against her own wish and liking."

"Liking!" scoffed Steinhardt. "What has liking to do with it? Liking should come after marriage with a proper, modest girl, not go before."

"That may be your foreign way, 'Manuel, but it's not our English way, nor our Lancashire way nowther."

"Confound your Lancashire!" cried Steinhardt.

"If it had not been for Lancashire, my lad," said Birley, thoroughly roused, "you wouldn't be the big man you are!"

"Are you mad?" exclaimed Steinhardt, striding up and down the hearth-rug, and glaring from Birley to me. "You shall repent

this! Mr. Unwin, I had better have a talk with you another time."

I took this as a dismissal, and was going.

"Unwin, bide, lad," said Birley. "I want you to be witness of what I have to say: I may as well say it now; it's been bound to come for a long while. You see that man there—that foreigner, that German—that grinds our Lancashire folk small under his great clumsy boot, and that threatens now to ruin me—that's what he means by saying I'll repent this—I took him into my office when he was a raw lad, with no recommend but that he was willing to work; I gave him a better place in my print-works; I was his friend; I treated him like a brother." The dear old man's voice wellnigh broke; it was not pleasant to see the unrelenting, uncompromising malignity with which Steinhardt listened.—"I gave him money to get him a partnership with Paul——"

"Which I paid back," interrupted Steinhardt.

"Ay, lad," said Birley, "you paid me back more than that; you paid me back for all I did in your own way—you took my print-works from me——"

"Your own mad extravagance did that."

"You set my friend Paul against me," continued Birley, waving away his interruption; "you've got my other shop now almost into your hands——"

"Your bad management has done that."

"You've done with Paul's money as if it were your own; and you've proposed to me that I should agree to your taking that £20,000 of the lawsuit from his girl's fortune."

"Soh!" growled Steinhardt, becoming more German in his rage. "It is now done! There is an end! We are no more to each other!"

"I know that, 'Manuel, my lad. And you're glad of it, and so, I think, am I. And now you may finish me off—but you shall not beggar the orphan girl. Now my say is done. You're very proud to-night of having deceived an English Court of Law; but don't you holloa so loud till you're out of the wood; you haven't done yet with Law nor with Lancashire."

The old man turned and left the room, looking ten years older; he seemed to falter in his step, and the usually ruddy tints of his face had died out, leaving his cheeks and lips of an ashy hue. I followed him without a word. In the hall he took his hat; I did the same and accompanied him in silence from the house and through the village; I would have seen him home, but

he insisted on my leaving him when my lodgings were reached.

I went indoors, but I could not stay. I was in the wildest perturbation of feeling which I think I had ever experienced. The close air of my little sitting-room stifled me, and when I left it the air of the village oppressed me almost as much. I could not, strive as I would to turn my attention to other things, get rid of the burning impression of that painful scene in the dining-room of Timperley Hall. My resentment of the brusque treatment I had myself experienced from Steinhardt was keen, but it was nothing compared with the indignation I felt at the terribly pathetic tale of ingratitude revealed by old Birley's words; and that again had to give place to a feeling of horrible dread and loathing of that unscrupulous, overbearing German ruffian. I had watched him closely, even with a certain fascination of intentness, and throughout the scene I had caught not so much as the wink of an eyelid, or the movement of a single nerve or muscle indicative of anything but the most unwavering determination to assert himself and his will, no matter what came in the way. I was appalled, I may say frankly, terrified at the exhibition of such remorseless inhumanity—all the more so that I did not find it out of keeping with anything I had before known of the man. If another stood in his way, he would not merely tread on his toes with a crunch of his big boot; he would lift him in his strong German arms and fling him aside. He had "eaten up" his old friend Birley, from no small vindictiveness, it was evident, but from an all-devouring self-aggrandisement. And what greater enormity would he hesitate to commit so long as it brought him nearer his chief end? To what did all this vague dread and surmise tend? To my horror I found that the suspicion of what had been Lacroix's fate, which had hitherto been whirling and curling in my imagination like a lurid vapour, was now assuming definite shape and settling upon Steinhardt! Why should he have done to death his partner? I could not tell. I could scarcely make a guess worth the name. If he had, was the method of it such as had been indicated in Dick's confession? If he had—how? where had he bestowed the traces of the crime?

It was a terrible suspicion to be tortured with that quiet summer evening. I knew that, on the face of it, it was a wild hallucination—that a wealthy

foreigner whom I happened to dislike should have fixed upon him by me the death of a friend and neighbour who had disappeared in London. On the vaporous evidence I had—the dream of a sensitive, lonely girl, and the death-bed confession of a delirious workman—it was preposterous. A trained detective of Scotland Yard, I believed, would laugh at it. Yet, after all, might it not well be that in the mysterious dispensations of Providence I had been led to this Timperley to show that the preposterous was true?

Fatigued, and sick almost, with this fearful speculation (I had a sudden accession of horrified dread as I passed the entrance to Timperley Hall—its lights were out, except in that window over the hall door—at the thought that Louise, the forlorn girl who had taken possession of my heart, was in the same house with Steinhardt!), I returned to my lodgings and went to bed.

I dreamed that night a very vivid dream. I saw Steinhardt, as a Viking of the old English days of violence and rapine, land on the shore of the pond, in the midst of weird, tinted vapours. He had for crest on his helmet the semblance of a large bird in the action of alighting—it should have been a raven, I knew, but its plumage was not black, but many tinted—and he threatened with his sword a maiden whom I felt to be Louise.

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CHAPTER VII.

OLD JAQUES.

NEXT evening I went to Freeman's, who was going away for his holiday the second morning after. The humane and cheerful society of himself and his wife, and the genial air of home and of mutual concord always about them, were to me at all times exceedingly pleasant. But it was not merely to enjoy their company and conversation that I visited them then. I wished to remind Freeman of his promise to make inquiries in London concerning Mr. Lacroix, and especially to underline cer-

tain places for inquiry. The reader will understand why I advised Mr. Freeman to institute careful inquiry at the stations of the great railway lines that run northward from London—most careful inquiry at the station of the Great Northern Railway; but Mr. Freeman did not readily understand why I should urge these points.

"Come," said he, looking at me hard, and in evident surprise, "what's in your noddle now?—what new suspicion have you worked up?"

"Don't look so surprised at me," I was piqued into saying. When I felt his sober scrutiny wou'd be turned upon my structure of evidence, I doubted, for the time, its coherence and stability, and this doubt in myself I resented; "I am quite sane and serious. I have had 'borne in' upon me the impression—I can't quite say how it came—that Lacroix left London that night——"

"What night?"

"Thursday, March the sixteenth, of last year. Miss Lacroix has told me he was at his hotel, it has been found, on that day."

"I hadn't heard the date named before."

"I then told him how, on turning over the pages of my "Bradshaw," I had discovered the existence of a very late train from London.

"But," said he, "there are trains almost as late on other lines."

"But not so quick," said I.

"Besides," said he, "you don't know that the train you mention was running more than a year ago."

"No; I do not." I was a little put out. Still I urged, "I have, however, another strong reason—which I do not think I am quite at liberty to tell you at present — why I believe my speculation that he left London that night may turn out true."

"Left for home, I suppose you think? But why should he suddenly set off home late at night without intimation?"

"I cannot tell. But might he not, for instance, have heard somehow, or have suspected, that Steinhardt was still using the patent they had been fined so heavily for infringing? It is clear, surely, from this recent law affair that Steinhardt has never left off using it."

"Of course," said he, looking very serious and meditative, "that certainly might be. But," he continued, in a new tone of alarm, "what does all this speculation mean? You surely haven't let your suspicion go so far as to imagine poor Lacroix came home to—to find a violent death?

Have you really let yourself think so morbidly of things as to suspect Steinhardt of causing it? He, I know, is without much scruple of conscience—but that, my friend, is altogether too horrible!—too incredible! Besides, why——" He stopped, but I could see what he would say in the careful, considering look he gave me.

"Yes," said I, "I know; you think why should I imagine that this should have remained undiscovered—unsuspected, if you like—for a year, only for me to find out, or suspect,—me, a man of no extraordinary perception or discrimination."

"Well, Unwin," said he, "I will confess I did think something like that. You must excuse me."

"Certainly. But I don't pretend to have lighted on the things that make me suspect through my own shrewdness of suspicion; I don't pretend to be the mover in the matter at all. Indeed, when I look back over the few months I have been here, I am surprised to see how the several points of my suspicion have been almost forced on my attention in ways that appear to me quite unusually providential."

Freeman turned and looked through the window, very grave and thoughtful.

"It is, perhaps," said I, now roused to a considerable pitch of feeling, "not a very Christian doctrine, but I believe, or I imagine, there is a conscious Divine Vengeance that broods upon the world, and that takes severe note of the persistent evil deeds of evil doers, and marks them out for unrelenting punishment, secret or open, slow or swift, and that chooses its instruments, or agents, of punishment in a fashion of its own."

"Good gracious, Unwin, what a dreadful belief!"

"I don't think you would have much to say against it if you had been with me last night in the dining-room of Timperley Hall, and seen our dear friend Birley moved almost to tears before that German ruffian, and then seen him leave the house a ruined and heart-broken man."

He sat in silent amazement; and I related the scene I had witnessed.

"After hearing all that," I said, "and seeing how Steinhardt behaved and looked I can believe any cruelty or wickedness of him. I do not think that even you now will consider my horrible suspicion so preposterous."

Freeman sat silent, pulling his big beard.

"I think," said he at length, with a thin smile, "Nature after all can't have intended me for a criminal investigator: I couldn't

find it in me to think any human being capable of such a crime as that. Then, perhaps, you would say Steinhardt is not a human being; he is only a foreigner sent for our sins to poison us with his diabolical chemistry."

"Perhaps," said I, "I have happened to see Steinhardt frequently at his worst; I know that he can make a clear, shrewd speech on a public platform, that he is cheered whenever he appears, that people who see him only in public and hear of him from a comfortable distance respect him immensely as one of the most distinguished of 'self-made men,' that he is a pillar of the Church and a supporter of charities,—and in spite of all that I think him utterly without pity or scruple. I even think with anxiety now of Miss Lacroix's being in the same house with him. But, of course, you understand that I would never think of saying this to another, or of hinting at the suspicion that haunts me; indeed, I had no intention of mentioning it to you when I came in."

"Well," said Freeman, "I suppose, as I said, the instinct of detection, or suspicion even, is not very strong in me; but I will do my best for you in London."

"And," said I, "I think I can make particular inquiry at King's Cross easier for you. I used to be very friendly with an official there of high standing: I will write to him."

I wrote to my old friend as soon as I returned to my lodgings. I related the circumstances of Lacroix's disappearance, and mentioned the suspicion, which "those who are most interested in his fate entertain," that he really set out by train, probably from King's Cross, to return home, and asked him to be so good as to give such help as he could to my friend Freeman in his attempt to find out whether that were so or not. I wrote the letter and posted it; yet I had not such hopes as before of Freeman's success, a consequence, probably, of my talk with him.

But all half hopes and lingering doubts were soon melted and merged into a passionate conviction that the mystery would yet be cleared up, and a fervent longing to take a more active part myself in effecting that.

It was the very next morning on returning along the Lacroix lane from the little station to which I had accompanied Freeman and his wife that I met Louise near the pond again. She came towards me at once, with a look of premeditation.

"I have been looking for you," said she. (How sweet those

words sounded!) "I knew you were gone to the station. I have something I wish to say. Will you come with me into uncle Jaques' cottage? We shall be there safe from being watched."

What suspicion, I wondered, prompted that? I entered the little octagonal building for the first time, and was immediately in presence of the old paralytic, who sat huddled and wrapped in blankets in a great armchair, with his lifeless hands lying limp in his lap. It was with a strange feeling of pity, and something like awe, that I looked upon this feeble, almost lifeless, remnant of a famous historic family, spending the last flickers of his existence in a humble cottage in a foreign land. A single flash of fancy was enough to show me behind him a long line of warriors, statesmen, courtiers, and priests of the old French régime, from which stood out, near the end, the figure of the white haired old soldier of the Bastille falling slaughtered amid the Paris mob, and that the glory and honour and courage of the past should end in this and here! Was it not sufficient to fill the heart with an unutterable sadness and despair of life? His eyes were bright, but there seemed to be no speculation in them; his toothless gums mumbled, but no sound was uttered. As I looked there came into my mind the poet's words:—

> "The cheeks fall in, the body bows.—
> Man dies,—nor is there hope in dust."

And as I looked again, when Louise went up and addressed him, and saw the head without motion, and the bright eyes also, although their expression altered as if the sound of her voice woke pleasant memories, I found myself thinking of an engraving that had once caught my attention of the famous statue of Voltaire in the Théâtre Français. And as Voltaire I ever afterwards thought of him..

"He cannot speak a word," said Louise to me; "and I do not think he can quite hear now." But for all that she spoke in a low voice. "He looks better, though, since the summer began, poor Uncle Jaques! The old man who looks after him is gone out, so we may talk as if there were no one here."

She threw off her hat and jacket, for the air of the room was very close: a small fire burned in the grate. I felt impelled to sit so that I could observe the old man without turning; for his appearance fascinated me.

"I want to go away, Mr. Unwin," she began at once, in a low tone of intense feeling, "out of this terrible place, away from the

despot, Mr. Steinhardt. I want to go and find out what has become of my poor father, and I want you to help me to go, if you will be so good."

"Has Mr. Steinhardt, then," I asked, "been saying or doing something to you?"

"Oh, yes, indeed! Yesterday, you know, I saw Mr. Birley, and he said, very sadly, almost with tears, that he must not come to see me any more. I asked him why; and then it all came out: he told me you know it all,—how Mr. Steinhardt has been so terribly ungrateful, how he has ruined him. His name, he said, would appear any day now in the *Gazette*. In the evening, then, I told Mr. Steinhardt that I wanted some of my money, or of my father's money, to help Mr. Birley. He laughed and said I had no money, and what little money of my father's was left could not be touched till his death was proved. I then, I think, was angry and called him ingrate; and he was angry, in his way, and rude. He called me a rude, immodest girl. He said I thought of men before they asked me (I don't know at all what he meant). He told me I must make up my mind to marry Frank, as he wished, and as my father had wished, or I should not stay long in his house. I said my father would have never wished me to marry anyone without love. He answered, that was of no consequence: he was now in my father's place. I left him and went to my room, and, thinking it over, it came to me how he must have disliked my poor father, if he could speak to me so, and how he, perhaps, did not much wish to have father's death cleared up. Then I thought that it was likely he had taken not much trouble to inquire about him in London—all that, you see, was in his hands. But now I will go to London myself, away from his rudeness, and find out the whole matter for myself—if you will help me."

She had run on in a rapid tone of intense excitement that permitted of no interruption. At one point she seemed about to break down, and on the impulse I had put my hand on hers, but she had let it remain there, as if unconscious of it, until I took it away. I had much to do to restrain myself from confessing how much I loved her, how much I was devoted to her, and her interests and aims; but I felt it would be ungenerous thus to take advantage of her unsuspecting frankness. I was struck, too, by the coincidence that her quick feeling had led her to something of the same suspicion of Steinhardt,

as the force of what seemed to me evidence had impelled me to. This I told her.

"It is singular," I said, "that you in your own way should have come to the same conclusion about Steinhardt as I have gradually been coming to. I do not trust him at all; he is pitiless and unscrupulous, and—I am sure he would make no more inquiries concerning your father than seemed necessary for the sake of appearances. But, dear Miss Lacroix, I think you can do no good by going to London yourself. Let me act for you in the matter; believe me, I have it as much at heart as if it were my own. Have a little patience, and I think we shall get at something."

"Why," she asked, eagerly, "have you heard something at last from the friends to whom you wrote?"

"No, I have not.

"I suppose," said she, with some bitterness, "it is to them only the loss of one stranger out of the crowds all around them?"

I then told her of the mission Freeman had undertaken, refraining, however, from saying that I had directed his attention to the railway stations, more particularly to the Great Northern, and I advised her to remain at Timperley Hall for the present, and to conduct herself towards Steinhardt so as not to excite his resentment or suspicion.

Upon this, we prepared to leave the cottage, and, on glancing casually away from her, I was arrested by the behaviour of the old man.

"Look at him!" I involuntarily exclaimed.

His face was flushed, and as if puffed with blood; his eyes were extraordinarily bright and watchful; his mouth twitched grotesquely, as if in the effort to use it for speech, and his right leg and shoulder stirred a little under the blankets.

"Oh!" cried Louise. Perhaps seeing us and hearing us talk—if he has heard us—has roused him! Uncle Jaques," she said, in a loud voice, going to him and laying her warm, soft hand on his withered, lifeless wrist, "are you feeling better?"

His only answer was a wink of his bright eyes.

"Here is John coming," she continued to him. "I shall come and see you to-morrow again."

We left the cottage as John approached with his wheelbarrow, bearing the shell-fish for his afternoon round. He knew me; I had assisted him once with his barrow on the hill. It struck me strangely to note his

distinctly foreign, his French look, and his French courtesy of manner, and then to hear him speak the rough Lancashire tongue. He had been for many years the faithful attendant of old Jaques; he commonly passed among the villagers by the name of "*Bite o' my Leg*," because of his odd utterance of the cry, "Buy them alive!"

"I think your master must be rousing up a little, John," said Louise.

"Yea," said John; "I think he mun, miss. Seems to me he may get as weel again as he was afore th' other master went to Lunnon."

As I took my way through the village to my lodgings, I found myself turning over these words of John: how "well," I wondered, had old Jaques been before his nephew went to London? If he could recover speech, could he tell us anything of consequence concerning him?

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CHAPTER VIII.

"MAR 15 82."

BOTH Miss Lacroix and myself waited impatiently for news from Freeman in London. From day to day I expected a letter; and day after day, when I met her, either in Jaques' cottage or in the little clough beyond Timperley Hall, I had to tell her that no letter had come. She quickly began to show signs of that heart-sickness, which in the young is so ready to follow upon the steady, indefinite postponement of hope. In my efforts to encourage her I encouraged myself also to believe that an Over-ruling Power was holding this mystery in hand for some great purpose, only to reveal it eventually with the more force and effect. Again and again, too, I longed to take her in my arms and assure her that, whatever should come, I was ever her devoted lover and servant in all things; but I felt only too keenly that it would not do; it would not be fair thus to force my love upon her notice while she was still so engrossed with the more serious matter. I therefore put a severe restraint upon myself, and looked forward to the day when her regard would naturally

turn to me as a chief agent in the solution of the mystery which had haunted her so long. But for all that, to be in her company filled me with something like delight in the present as well as hope for the future.

One evening, when I met her in the clough, we were both startled and silenced by the clear, full note of a bird — a liquid "*joug-joug*."

"Is it a thrush?" I said, in a whisper.

She listened breathless, almost panting, with joy.

"Oh," she whispered at length, "it is a nightingale!—it is a nightingale!" and, poor girl! she actually sobbed. "How can the dear little bird have got so far out of its way as this dreadful place?"

I listened, almost as much moved as she was. I also was convinced it was a nightingale, and I saw and felt more clearly than I had ever seen or felt before what a horror and desolation life for her in Timperley must be. Understanding this I longed more and more to take out of it into the brightness and joy and hope natural to youth, into the innocent pleasure afforded by sunny skies, green fields, and shady woods vocal with the song of birds.

After a rapt attention of some minutes to the ravishing song, both of us were impelled to go away to tell others of our delight. The path out of the clough led along the ridge behind Timperley, past two or three neat little houses. From one of these we were surprised, as we approached, to hear music and singing of an unusually fine quality. It was just growing dark; a lamp shone out from a window, over which the blind was not yet drawn, and we could plainly see a man seated at the piano, and a girl, slight and small of figure, standing with her hand on his shoulder. She sang in a voice clear and sweet as a bird's, a song then much in vogue, called "Ehren on the Rhine." As we passed the song ended, and the player turned. We saw his face, and each exclaimed to the other, "Why, it's Frank!" So here dwelt the reason of his indifference to Louise's beauty and sad grace! The discovery gave me a certain satisfaction, I must confess, for I doubt it is true that it somewhat piques a man to know that the charms which have won his heart have no influence on another who has had full opportunity for observing them.

"Oh, what would his father say, if he knew!" exclaimed Louise, in alarm.

"I don't think we'll tell him," said I.

As we passed away from the cottage the piano struck a preludic chord, and the sweet, sympathetic voice of the girl began a pretty little ballad about "The North Countree," which might have referred to Lancashire in the days before King Steam and Queen Cotton ruled over it.

I was that night more cheerful and hopeful than I had been since my coming to Timperley. I was not addicted to writing letters to the newspapers, but the presence in that district of the little bird of song, that usually suggested soft, clear skies and scented groves, was so extraordinary, and seemed to me so delightful, that I sat down and indited a letter concerning the phenomenon to a daily paper of some importance published in the neighbouring large town. The paper, I knew, was widely read, but I had not reckoned upon my letter attracting such attention as it did. The second night after I had written it men and women of all conditions, but chiefly of the working class, were inquiring their way through the village, or finding their way along all the roads and lanes to "The Nightingale Clough." The small weekly papers, of course, copied the letter, and on Saturday and during the following week parties came from long distances in 'buses and vans to hear the nightingale sing. I went first one night, and then another and another to see the crowd thus drawn together.

It was a strange and touching spectacle: the men and women, the lads and lasses standing under the trees down to the very edge of the discoloured little lake, and the mischievous boys among the branches,—all hushed while the summer twilight deepened into dark about them, waiting patiently for the unseen little bird to break forth like a voice from Heaven into rapturous song. And when at length, after a few timid notes, it poured out its full heart, I heard many a low sob mingling with the strains of the artless music.

Whether the nightingale took alarm at this invasion of its solitude, or whether some mischievous persons frightened it, it is certain that by the end of the week it was heard no more, and the people went away disappointed and noisy. One of these evenings I was returning with the crowd, when an old fellow walked alongside of me, looking at me hard, and at length speaking.

"Thou'rt parson as wrote th' letter—eh?"

I answered I was.

"Ah. An' thou'rt fro' London—eh? A grit place that—

wi' gyardens, I've heard say, full o' a' kinds o' brids and beasts."

I said I supposed he meant the Zoological Gardens.

"Ah. Happen that's them. I'm rare and fond o' brids and beasts. I mun go to London some day and see them gyardens. Happen I may come across thee: I hear thou'rt leaving Timperley."

"In a very few weeks," I said.

"Weel, now, I like thee; and I mun come and hear thee praich afore thou goes. Ee, mon, I ha' something here, tho'" —he produced an old pocket-book, and from one of the compartments he took a square of pasteboard, which he gave me; —"happen that may come in handy when thou goes back to London. I found it in Lacroix's lane yond' more'n a year ago, and says I, 'I mun keep this till I go to London,' but I do not think I'll ever ride in a first-class carriage, so thou'dst better tak' it, mon."

"What is it?" I asked.

"To be sure," said he, "thoo conna see. It's a first-class ticket."

I thanked him, and put it in my pocket.

We were then upon the cottage in which I had seen Frank Steinhardt sitting at the piano. Sounds of music and singing were again proceeding from it, and I was not surprised to see that many of those who had been disappointed by the nightingale stood listening in silence to the girl.

When I reached my lodgings, I took out the old fellow's singular little present. It was the "return" half of a first-class railway ticket from *London Bridge* to *Croydon*. It was tolerably clean; it must have been thrown away, or dropped, soon after it was issued, and picked up soon after it was thrown away. A suspicion which had begun to creep upon me when first I looked at it shot up with startling suddenness when I turned it over and read the date stamped on its edge—"MAR 15 82."

This ticket had been found by the old man in Lacroix lane. Had the person who had lost or dropped it there been the same as the person who had bought it in London? If he had, had he been a resident in Timperley? In a word, had the person been Mr. Lacroix? It was impossible to say, until after such inquiry as I saw little chance of being able to make; for though visitors to Timperley seldom passed along the Lacroix lane, they sometimes did. I might, however, discover from Louise

whether her father had had any connection with Croydon.

I met her next day at Jaques' cottage (I had almost given up my visits to Timperley Hall). After again answering in the negative her constant question as to news from Freeman, I began my attempt to get at this point concerning the ticket. I wished to avoid raising in her undue suspicion.

"Do you still wish," I asked, "to go to London your self?"

"I do," said she; "but I take your advice, and wait."

"If you went," I continued, "where would you stay? Have you any friends in London?"

"I hoped," said she, shyly, "you would tell me somewhere to go."

"You have, then," said , "no friends about London, or anywhere round? It is not necessary, you know, that you should live in London to follow up inquiries."

"Well," said she, "I know two or three girls living in London who were at school with me in Croydon, but I think I could not ask them."

Imagine how my heart leaped! I was afraid I showed my emotion in my look and tone. I quickly urged another question.

"Croydon is not far from London. Might not your old schoolmistress take you in?"

"I did not think of that," said she; "I was there for only a year after I left school in Paris. I had only been home three months when father went away."

I had learned more than I could have anticipated. Here, surely, at length, was the strongest presumptive, if not direct evidence that Mr. Lacroix, and not another, had dropped the ticket, and therefore that he had come home. I imagined him travelling from London Bridge to Croydon, to pay, perhaps, his daughter's school-bill, and returning a different way, although he had taken a return ticket to London Bridge. This struck me as agreeing with all I had heard of Mr. Lacroix—careless of money and without much steady, consistent purpose. How easily such a man must have become subject to the resolute Steinhardt!

It occurred to me that it would not be impossible to learn from the Croydon schoolmistress whether Mr. Lacroix had called on her. With a few questions as to the size, situation, and character of the school, I learned the name and address of the schoolmistress, and as soon as I returned to my lodgings I wrote to her. On the second morning after, I received her reply, which

I treasured along with the railway ticket as invaluable evidence—a polite note, presenting compliments and begging to inform that on referring to her books and her diary, she found that Mr. Lacroix had called and paid a term's charges for his daughter's "finishing" education, on Wednesday, March the fifteenth, eighteen hundred and eighty-two.

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CHAPTER IX.

THE SHADOW ON THE WALL.

On Saturday, Freeman and his wife returned home; they had been absent for what is known as a "parson's fortnight," in which, that is, one Sunday only is included. He called on me in the evening. I, of course, soon turned to the Lacroix inquiry.

"No go," said he, shaking his head.

He had gone about to all the stations, and had been stared at, almost jeered, for expecting railway porters, guards, and such-like persons to remember a man whom they might have seen, or might not have seen, more than fifteen months before—especially since there did not seem to have been anything particular about the gentleman to attract notice. He had been rather better received at King's Cross. There my friend introduced him to the superintendent of passenger traffic, and he had promised to push inquiry as far as he could and to write the result.

"So, you see," said Freeman, up to the present the result is absolutely *nil*, and I'm afraid *nil* it will be to the end of the chapter, with the trifling addition of waste of time and vexation of heart. I know, my dear fellow," said he, "how interested you are in the matter,—that it is, so to say, a point you would give anything to make; but do consider, now, its hopelessness. The poor man is gone—disappeared without a sign, as many men do disappear, and——"

"*He* is not gone without a sign. Look at that"—showing him my recently acquired palpable evidence, the return ticket

and the schoolmistress's note. Some feeling of triumph in me was surely excusable. I told him how I had come by the ticket and what I had learned from Louise. "And that," said I, "I take as the strongest possible presumptive evidence that soon after March the 15th Mr. Lacroix was in Lacroix lane."

"It is very remarkable, certainly," said he; "it makes me ready to believe with you that he really did come home. Still, you know, it is miles away from actual proof."

"I know that," said I; "but it convinces me at least that the mystery is no longer in London but in Timperley."

"I think," said he, "after all you are a better detective than I am."

I am afraid I was proud of myself; but a long humiliation soon began which sorely tried all my hope and fortitude.

The end of my six months' curacy was almost at hand, but, since my recent discovery, I was resolved I would still remain at least in the neighbourhood of Timperley. I went first to the rector, who was not yet well enough to resume his duties, in the hope that I might prevail upon him to let me continue to fill his place for some time longer. I was surprised, and somewhat piqued, to hear that it was entirely out of the question, because another curate had already been engaged.

"A young man from St. Bee's," said the rector. "Mr. Steinhardt says we must have no more clever men in Timperley. I would have liked you very well to stay, but you know—you see it can't be. If I can do anything for you——"

I said, since I could not stay in Timperley, I wished to get a curacy somewhere in the neighbourhood. The rector looked at me in a way which made me doubt whether I had been wise to tell him my desire. However, he answered he would see what he could do.

Steinhardt, it was evident, expected me to go away, back to the south probably, since I disliked Timperley so much; but I metaphorically shook my Croydon evidence at him and more obstinately resolved not to go away. There happened at that time to be several curacies vacant in neighbouring parishes or districts; I applied first for one, with the result after some time of having my application declined, and then for another, with the same result. I was disappointed and puzzled; I knew I had been reckoned successful in Timperley, and I could not understand the coldness and reticence of the replies I received.

But I was soon startled into the perception of their cause.

Louise and I had got into the habit of meeting frequently (as I have already hinted) at the cottage of old Jaques: we were still waiting for news from King's Cross, and we did not know whether the letter was to be sent to me, or to Freeman, or to Miss Lacroix. Louise met me one morning, in great alarm, and hurriedly told me the expected letter had come, but addressed to *Mr.* Lacroix!—that Steinhardt therefore had opened it, naturally expecting to find it a business communication! He brought it to her, and asked if she knew what it meant. She read it; it was short, and to this effect:—The guard who had had charge of the eight o'clock Express on the evening of March the 16th, 1882, had been found and interrogated; he could not remember anyone answering to the description of the missing gentleman. He might or might not have travelled by that train, but it really seemed impossible to ascertain at that distance of time.

"Oh," said she, in a terrified voice, "Mr. Steinhardt looked terrible! He asked me if I had written telling someone to ask such questions. I answered at once, 'No; but Mr. Unwin has.' I wish I had not said that; for he said at once, 'Oh; Unwin, I'll make short work of him.' So, please! do be careful! I could see in his eyes how cruel he might be. I said, 'Surely there is no harm in trying to find out what has become of my poor father?' 'Oh,' said he, 'no harm at all—none at all,' and went away."

I could not but regret this very much; I was disposed at first to blame Freeman, but on consideration I saw that I myself should have provided against such a contingency as this. It was certainly a serious and unfortunate matter to have roused Steinhardt's suspicions at that stage of the inquiry; Louise, plainly, was so alarmed on my account that she forgot the disappointment of no news concerning her father. I felt strongly tempted to tell her of my own discovery; but I feared that might only precipitate a disclosure to Steinhardt, and forebore. It might have been well if I had told her then. I encouraged her, however, still to hope, as I did.

It was, therefore, with some anxiety that I received and accepted an invitation to an interview — I had almost said, a collision—with Steinhardt that evening, at seven o'clock, in the laboratory of the Chemical Works. I had never yet been

within the mysterious, tainted precincts, and it was with something of a shudder that I asked myself why he should have invited me to call upon him there, and at an hour when probably there would be no one in the place except himself and the watchman. I went, however, with the sternest courage I could summon.

I cannot describe the laboratory, for I clearly saw only Steinhardt, red as a Mephistopheles; all else was a jumble of retorts, taps, tubs of raw colour and what not. He was very civil.

"I asked you to come and see me here, Mr. Unwin," he began, "because I am watching an experiment which I cannot leave, and I wanted to see you at once. You have not taken my word for it that Miss Lacroix is not for you; you have been seeing her at times and places when you should not." He paused and looked at me, as if expecting me to say something. I was silent, and he went on, "Miss Lacroix is not a girl to be the wife of a clergyman who has his way to make; she is beautiful, I know, but she has no money—nothing to speak of. Your time here will be up in another week or so; you have been trying to get a place near here, but you cannot; it will not do to stay about in this neighbourhood. I will help you to get a good place in the south—a living of your own—I know I can, and you must go away to-morrow. There is a cheque I have written for your quarter's salary."

"I am sorry, Mr. Steinhardt," said I, "I cannot go away to-morrow; and I cannot promise to leave the neighbourhood."

"Oh! you cannot. Think again. If you do not go, I must send away my family."

"My mind is quite made up," said I.

"It is? Very well." He rose, as if to end the interview, and I rose also. "You had better take the cheque," said he, pushing it towards me; "it is almost due, and I shall not want to see you again."

I took it, and was going. Involuntarily I glanced about for any vat or vessel which I could think of as that which had figured in Dick's confession. He seemed to notice my curious glances.

"You have never been in here before," said he. "That is the most interesting place"—pointing to a small door. "Would you like to look in? I call it the Experiment Bath."

I said I would, and my heart beat wildly.

"You must let me tie up your mouth and nose, then," he said,

taking some kind of muffler from a drawer.

I wondered whether this were *the place*, and whether he was going to show it me out of bravado, or whether he was quite unconscious of my suspicion. I determined to go through with it. I was muffled, and he muffled himself. He opened the door, and I saw a small chamber, filled with purplish-red vapour, in which a gas-jet burned dully, and with an unwonted tint.

"Enter," said he.

I entered, and he followed.

"This," said he, raising a lid by some arrangement, "is my experiment."

Vapour rose more densely from the vessel, whose outlines I could not discern. I felt stifled; I gasped for breath. I tugged at the muffler; I could not help it. I reeled; I felt his hand on me—whether to snatch or to push me I cannot now say; but I thought then the former. With a violent effort I recovered myself, and turned at once to look at him, and saw—great Heavens!—the very counterpart on the wall behind him of that shadow, with head and hands outstretched, which Dick's delirious figure had cast, only vaguer, because of the vapour.

"What! Again!" I involuntarily cried, and dashed from the chamber.

I had to sit down to recover myself; I trembled violently. I thought, when he undid his muffler, he looked paler and more open-eyed. Did he suspect now my suspicion?

"It is very risky, you see," he said, calmly enough, but with a very keen look, that longed, no doubt, to read me, "very risky to enter my bath."

I said not a word, but, after a moment or two, rose with a "Good night," and went out into the air.

Had he intended to suffocate me? Thinking calmly of the adventure now, I do not think so. I think the danger I escaped was altogether owing to my own rashness and folly.

CHAPTER X.

OUT OF THE DEEPS.

I WAS scarcely surprised when, next day, I received a hurried note from Louise. They were all going away at once, she said —all except Mr. Steinhardt. He had come home late, and told them they must pack that night, to be ready to set off in the morning—to the seaside somewhere—where she did not know yet, but she would write to me as soon as she had an address to give, so that I might send her any news. How I treasured that little note! It was the first bit of writing I had had from her; and I read it again and again that day, and for many days, and tried to conjure a hidden meaning, a lurking touch of tenderness or concern out of its ordinary words. A strange feeling of being alone and forksaken seized me—a foolish feeling, which I could not shake off for some days.

I looked in upon old Jaques, as usual. He had been recovering himself since I had seen him first—at least, regaining a consciousness of his own existence, and of the existence of things about him. I thought that day I could see a something in his eyes, and in the twitching of his mouth, which told that he missed the presence of his niece. He gazed at me long and keenly, till I felt rather disconcerted, looked down at his hands (the fingers of the right hand trembled a little), and uttered some guttural sounds, as if in an effort to articulate. I talked to him a little, though I was not sure he could hear me, or, hearing, could understand. I told him his niece had gone away to the seaside; I hoped it would do her good, for she had been in a very anxious state of mind since her father's loss. It gave myself some relief to speak of these things. When I rose to go away, he looked me shrewdly up and down, and watched me to the door. A week or two passed before I saw him again.

My time was taken up with attempts to provide a post for myself against the day when I should leave that at Timperley. Under ordinary circumstances I would have taken the oppor-

tunity of the season of the year and such a juncture in my affairs to spend a holiday among my friends; but I was now convinced the mystery I was pledged to clear up was in Timperley, and I was resolved to sit down and besiege it there—the more obstinately resolved, since I knew Steinhardt so heartily wished me away.

I wrote letters; I made journeys to this vicar and that rector in the neighbourhood, who then needed, or soon would need, a curate, with the same result in all cases. I would not do; I was not just the kind of man they wanted; they were not sure that my opinions were quite as they would wish the opinions of their curate to be. It became plain to me that I was to be "boycotted": the word had been passed round, apparently—and by whom, if not by Steinhardt?

In some indignation I called on the bishop (who is never inaccessible), and with him my suspicion received confirmation. His manner to me was severe and chilling. He told me that he feared my staying longer in Timperley, or its neighbourhood, would only lead to disagreeable complications; he had heard I still associated a good deal with "that seditious Dissenter"; I had caused annoyance and trouble again to Mr. Steinhardt by my letter to the newspapers about nightingales, and, above all, I persisted in interfering with certain family arrangements of that gentleman. I am afraid the worthy prelate, when I left him, thought me a very rude young man. I told him that I *must* remain in the Timperley neighbourhood for other reasons altogether than those Mr. Steinhardt was pleased to assign, and that I thought it very unfair I should be thus quietly and privately persecuted, because a man of some influence and wealth chose to dislike me; in my indignation I even said that the day might not be so very distant when Mr. Steinhardt's evidence on any matter would not be held of so much account or credence as it was then deemed.

Again and again I tried, though with little hope now, to find a curacy even in the neighbouring large town; but nothing came of my efforts except disappointment and weariness and disgust. My time was up in Timperley, but I still retained my lodgings there (they were cheap and comfortable); I held them like an outwork advanced against the enemy's position. The situation was, indeed, becoming like a duel between Steinhardt and me, in which, for the time, he certainly had the best of it. I

rambled all about the valley, prying even into the confines of Timperley Hall; I talked with the villagers; I even risked my reputation by sitting for an hour in a tap-room, listening to the dull, beery talk of its frequenters; I sat in my solitary sitting room, and smoked and racked my brain; I travelled into the town to its free library, and read for hours, till my head ached, and I seemed entirely bereft of ideas of my own, books which were not written by theologians or divines, and which the attendants seemed surprised I should continually ask for. All these things I did, so that by any means I might discover token or hint to guide me on my way towards the solution of the Lacroix mystery. But I found none, and I could think of none, and I was discouraged. I became sometimes so bewildered with guesses that led to nothing, that I had to restate the case to myself. The next thing I must have was conclusive proof that Mr. Lacroix had returned to Timperley. Supposing that found, was he, or was he not, suffocated (as I had almost been)?—or scalded, if he had fallen into a hot liquid? Was his death owing to accident or design? (since my own adventure, I was assailed by doubts that, after all, it might have been accidental)—and, however his death had been brought about, where had Steinhardt bestowed the remains? and if these should be found, would they be recognisable as those of Mr. Lacroix? All these points must be cleared (and I shuddered again and again as I tried to think them over calmly) before the mystery could be declared solved—before I could venture to turn Louise's thoughts away from her father to myself.

Thus fully three weeks passed, burdening me with the additional and ever-increasing anxiety of Louise's silence. I had not received a line since the day she had gone away. I did not know where she had gone, and I could only guess what designs Steinhardt was trying to carry out in regard to her. I did not think violence could be reckoned among the means by which he would seek to effect his purpose, so long as Mrs. Steinhardt was with her; but if that good lady were not with her, I dreaded to think what condition of submission her fear of Steinhardt and his threats might reduce her to, considering how she had already been worked upon and weakened by her unceasing morbid musing about her father.

I discovered that on two Saturdays in succession Stein

hardt had gone away, and remained absent over Sunday. On the third, it occurred to me to observe and follow him. I followed him as far as the town, and one of the railway stations —unnoticed, I thought; but he turned suddenly, and passed me with a "How d'ye do?" and I could follow him no farther. I saw, however, that he entered upon a platform at which Liverpool trains usually drew up.

On Sunday, in church, I heard near me a female voice which reminded me of the one we had heard sing to Frank Steinhardt's accompaniment. I glanced round and guessed that the voice might be indeed the same. Suppose I inquired of the singer whether she received (as was likely) letters from Frank? Might I not thus learn Louise's address? I went to the cottage, and asked to see "the young lady" (she was, I had learned, a mistress at one of the schools in the neighbourhood). She received me, of course, with surprise, which increased and changed to something like resentment when I began to make known my errand. She misunderstood me; she supposed I had come to make impertinent inquiries — perhaps on behalf of Mr. Steinhardt!— regarding her relations with Frank. But, on my explaining that I was interested in Miss Lacroix's affairs, and that I had not heard from her since they had gone away, that I did not even know where they had gone, she answered me readily enough. She *had* heard from Frank, but not since the first week of his absence (the poor girl, I could see, was inclined to cry); he had written from an address (which she gave me) in Douglas, in the Isle of Man, but he had said nothing about Miss Lacroix.

I wrote at once to the address given me, and waited impatiently for a reply. But day after day passed, and none came, and I sank into the deeps of anxiety and despondence. At the end of little more than a week, which seemed to me a month, I was tempted with weak thoughts of giving it all up, surrendering my position to Steinhardt, and going away. I was earning no money, and my quarter's stipend of twenty-two pounds ten shillings was rapidly disappearing. What could I do, when it was all gone, but surrender? I am not ashamed to confess that, oftener than once, I was betrayed into an unmanly prostration of disappointment—of despair, I may even say—and grief. But remember that I was desperately in love (I suppose a clergyman may be as desperately in love as another man) with a young lady

who might be dead, or dying, or *married*, for aught I knew; that I was sojourning, so to say, in a strange land, whose chief was bitterly hostile to me; and that the affair upon which I had staked my success in love had not advanced an inch during those long and lonely weeks.

I sometimes thought, indeed, that I was being punished for my presumption in seeking, by my own puny efforts, to get at the truth concerning Lacroix's fate, which, thus far, had not been discovered by me, but had been as if revealed to me by an Unseen Intelligence, directing the details of the revelation; and this thought would calm me for a time, and make me more patient. Let me wait, I told myself; the rest of the truth would come when the Unseen saw fit. At other times I would regard this view as mere superstition, and would again exert myself in tramping about, conversing with the villagers, and racking my brain—all to no purpose.

I do verily believe, however, that, in spite of the conviction which usually sustained me of the final revelation of the truth, —in spite, too, of the obstinacy of my nature, and the high reward of success which I had hoped to gain, I would, indeed, have soon beat a retreat, if it had not been for a visit I had from my old friend Birley, and the results that immediately followed upon that.

One evening I heard a loud, cheery voice there was no mistaking ask my landlady, "Is th' parson at whoam, Betty?" a question which I answered myself by calling, "Come upstairs."

"Well," said he, "you haven't come to see me since I've come back" (he had been ill, and absent from home for some weeks); "so I ha' looked you up."

I said I was very pleased indeed to see him (he looked much older and greyer than when I had seen him last, poor gentleman!).

"Now I've come," he continued, "to ha' a bit of serious talk with you, my friend. You know I wish you well, lad, and that I'd do all for you that a broken old chap can do; but there's no sense, tha knows, and no policy in sticking here wi' nought to do—not even courting. You love a lass, and, of course, naturally, hang about her; but, deuce take it, lad, what do you expect to get by hanging about the place when she's miles and miles away? Is it that the ground whereon her gentle feet have trod—eh? Come now, lad, let's talk the thing out; we can't ha' the folk about here that used

to think so much of you getting to look at you as a sort o' harmless *luney*."

"There is at least one person in the village," said I, somewhat nettled, "that does not believe me harmless, whether he thinks me a lunatic or not."

"Well," said he, "you munna be offended at my saying that."

"No, certainly," said I. "If there is one man who could never offend me, it is you, Mr. Birley. But, when I think of it, I am not surprised that people should begin to look upon me as a maniac, since nobody but myself knows altogether what I keep staying here for."

"Ah, well, of course," said he, looking mystified, but talking on at a venture, according to his wont, "you know your own affairs best; but you think nobody else knows this altogether. Well, I daresay——"

"I daresay," said I, interrupting him, "I am a monomaniac." The impulse seized me to take him into my confidence; I felt it would relieve and cheer me to talk to him about the matters that occupied my thought so much; he must know them sooner or later, and, by knowing them at that juncture, he might give me a useful hint. "Perhaps," said I, "you will think me mad if I tell you what really keeps me here. It is not, as you imagine, that I am in love with your ward, or with the ground she has walked on; I don't deny that I am in that condition; but it is not that keeps me here. I wish to tell you what it is, but you must promise me to keep it locked up in yourself."

"Nay, lad, if it's some very private affair of your own, do not tell me."

"But," said I, "it is no private affair of my own; indeed, it concerns you at least quite as much as me; and I think, perhaps, you might help me a little in it."

I then related my story, point by point, not even omitting mention of Louise's repeated dream, or of my own recent adventure in the chemical works. The effect my story had on him caused me great anxiety. Being by nature more of a talker than a listener, he could not refrain, at first, from breaking in now and then with a "To be sure," a "Just so," or an "Ah, yes—there you are"; but as the point of the story took hold of him, his talking instinct sought vent merely in occasional grunts, while he became paler and paler and more and more moved. He did not for a moment doubt that my suspicions pointed to the truth; he adopted them at once, and was enraged that he had not formed them for himself before.

"Stupid old idiot," he ex-

claimed, "that I was not to ha' guessed afore that 'Manuel would stick at nothing to get Paul eaten completely up! And Paul was a hot temper, and, if he had words wi' 'Manuel, there would be th' devil to settle! And, of course, Paul was likely to come home unexpected, to catch 'Manuel on th' hop, so to say, wi' that confounded patent again! Lord, Lord! if I had only thought of all that a year ago, it might ha' been easier to clear it up! Well, now, what can we do—eh? what can we do?"

I answered that I had been striving for weeks to discover what next to do; but I had not yet discovered it. I was anxious, too, now, I said, about Louise.

"Oh," said he, "I expect she's all right with my sister, in th' Isle of Man."

"I think," said I, "it's rash ever to 'expect' that anything is altogether right that Steinhardt is concerned in."

"True for you, lad," said he.

"Besides," I continued, "she promised to write to me, and she has not written. A week or more ago, when I had found out the Douglas address, I wrote and asked her to send me only a line to allay my anxiety; but I have had none."

He looked very grave.

"'Manuel," said he, "is a double-dyed villain, if he does aught to harm Paul's girl! I can see what he's up to, though; he has given no account of Paul's affairs yet, and if he can get Louise to marry Frank he needn't. He may want all the money he can get hold of soon; the plaintiffs in that Patent case have appealed, and he'll ha' to appear again and fight at th' next sitting of th' Court. But he shannot plunder the lass. I mun find if she's with my sister, and if he's frightening her—and if he be, by th' L—d! I mun get a writ of *mandamus* or summat, and tak' th' lass whoam wi' me. I'm guardian as much as him, and if th' lass would rather bide wi' me he cannot tak' her. Yea; I shall set about it."

I drew his attention back to the urgent necessity of doing something in her father's case: had he anything to suggest?

"Well, now, let me think," said he. "We'll suppose Paul came home that night,—late, you think, very late,—wi' his little portmanteau carried in his hand; he pulls out his handkerchief to blow his nose, or his repeater watch to know the time, as he comes down the lane, and so he drops that ticket. It's near one o'clock, may be, and there's not a light anywhere burning—yea, by the L—d! but there is!" he exclaimed,

turning and catching hold of my arm. "Right in th' road, as it were, as he comes by the pond, he sees th' light that burns a' night in old Jaques' cottage!" (Birley always pronounced the name "Jakes.") "Th' old chap seldom is put to bed; he usually sits or lies up in that chair of his all night and all day. Paul was aye fond o' th' old chap:—now does he lift latch and go in, just to say 'how-de-do,' or does he think it is too late, and he'd best go on and see what Steinhardt's up to?—If we could only get th' old chap to speak and tell us!"

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CHAPTER XI.

"LE JOURNAL AMUSANT."

WE set out at once to see old Jaques. It was growing dusk as we passed down the village street; we recognized the burly figure of Steinhardt emerge from the private entrance to the Chemical Works. He did not turn round, but walked steadily on before us till he took the lane leading to Timperley Hall.

When we entered the cottage, I observed that the position of Jaques' chair had been altered: it was much nearer the fire than I had before seen it, for the month of September was now well advanced. The only light in the room was that shed by a bright fire, towards which John (*alias* "Bite o' my Leg") sat cowering on a low stool, talking to himself or to his master—it was impossible to say which. The scene struck me as weird and suggestive. In the glow and flicker of a humble Lancashire fire, a ruin of the ancient *noblesse* of France sat in the substitute for a great chair of state, wrapped in blankets, calm and impassive as his fate, while at his feet mumbled the last of faithful peasant retainers.

"Th' old chap," whispered Birley to me, "used to begin to be at his best at this time o' night."

He drew up a chair and sat down familiarly by the paralytic and began to talk to him.

But the old man seemed to pay no attention, or not to hear; he never even turned his eyes, but slowly and absently winked as the flames flickered. I stood in the shadow beyond John; I asked him whether he thought his master was as well as he had seemed some weeks ago.

"Nay," said he; "I do not think he is—he seems to fall off again like, wi' th' fall o' th' year."

What if he should speedily so far fall off from consciousness of things and persons around him as to slide into that comatose condition in which, I understood, he had passed last winter? Where then would be our chance of learning anything from him, either by word or sign, concerning his nephew?—if, indeed, he had anything to communicate. The more I thought of Birley's suggestion, the more likely it seemed to me that Lacroix would not have passed his uncle's door that night (presuming always he had come home); and if he had not passed by the door, but entered, he was certain to have seen his uncle: for the old man was always either huddled in the great chair or stretched on the little bed in the corner. But then came the baffling question: If he had seen his uncle, had he seen him awake? I had never seen the old man asleep—but, still, it was to be supposed he slept sometimes.

But whatever had happened could only be discovered from the silent, sphinx-like invalid; his humble retainer, stooping between us, was too heavy and regular a sleeper, I judged, and when awake was too much occupied with his shell-fish and his master to have attention or memory to give to anything else much. Thus dismissing him in my mind from the scope of our inquiry, I happened to step round between him and old Jaques. The old man raised his eyes upon me where I stood in the light of the fire as upon a sudden apparition. His eyebrows and his mouth twitched, and some guttural sounds rose from his throat.

"Eh?" said Birley, interrupting the meandering flow of his talk and looking at the old man.

"He seems," said I, "to recognize me in some sort,—and doesn't he seem to wish to say something? Is there no way we can hit upon of communicating with him?—of making sure whether he hears and understands what is said?"

"Yea," said John, "he understands. When I say, 'Dost want breakfast, master?' or 'Wouldst like a drink?' he wakes up spry enough."

Not deeming this evidence sufficiently good I still looked at Birley.

"Is it any use writing something down?" said he.

"We may at least try its effect on him," I answered.

John lit the gas, and found me a clean sheet of paper, on which I wrote in pencil (there was no ink in the place: John could neither write nor read), in large, clear letters :—"*Do you remember your nephew Paul?*" This I held to old Jaques, so that the light fell well upon it. It evoked no kind of response either of eye or mouth. Perhaps I had not placed it at the proper focus for him to read. I tried to find the true distance, first by my own sight, and then by Birley's, and lastly I presented it to that of Jaques' again. This time his eyes seemed to seize it, and the fingers of his right hand twitched a little and trembled, as if he wished to hold the paper. I placed my right hand on his, and was alarmed to find his fingers convulsively close on it; I shuddered at their cold clasp; I even fancied—perhaps in my excitement I was mistaken—that vigour passed out of my arm and trembled into his; but if it did its force soon died. With some difficulty I undid the clasp of his long thin fingers. Meantime his eyes had wandered from the paper and could not be induced to return to it. Birley agreed with me that it would be well to strive no more with him that night.

Walking back through the village together we decided upon our next step in this attempt to get something from old Jaques. The following day we met in the town and went to consult a well known physician. Birley laid on me the task of stating our case. I made it as clear as I could without being too explicit. I said we wished to get some evidence if possible regarding an event that happened eighteen months before from an old man who had been either a partial or a complete paralytic for some years—we wished to get it as soon as possible. Could the physician's knowledge of such cases suggest a method?

How old was the man? he asked.

"Somewhere about seventy," said Birley. (I had thought him older.)

And he was a paralytic when this event happened he was wanted to remember?

"Yes," said Birley; "but I believe he was at that time pretty clear in th' head."

Was he now completely paralysed?

I answered that during the summer his right limbs had

seemed inclined to exert themselves a little; and I told him my experience of the night before with Jaques' right hand. He seemed somewhat struck with it.

"Well," said the physician, "your request is singular; I do not think I have ever been presented with a similar one. But you say the evidence you seek is of great consequence?—you cannot, of course, expect any speech from him clear enough to understand. But you may get what you want by writing,—may you not? I would then recommend that you should rub the right hand and arm with brandy—the best brandy—say, three times a day: be careful not to fatigue him;—and give him according as he will take it some brandy in milk,—say, two tablespoonfuls of brandy to the teacupful of milk. You may have to do that for a week or more, or even longer, before the man will find his hand obey his will. And even then I must warn you that you may find his memory is not trustworthy,—and more than that, if you succeed in getting what you want the treatment and the excitement you subject him to may prove too much for him; he may afterwards lapse back into complete prostration from which he may never recover at all."

So we left the physician. (Birley insisted upon paying the whole of his fee himself.) We were both rather aghast at the dilemma presented to our choice:—to try to gain our point by the only method the doctor had suggested would be to endanger old Jaques' feeble life; not to try, was to leave the Lacroix mystery where it was. We were both silent regarding it for some time. At length Birley vented his disquietude.

"I wish," said he, "we could leave the thing alone. It seems a shabby business to set about trying to show up my own sister's husband. I *would* let it alone, too, although 'Manuel has behaved so ill to me, if it wasn't that the man that's lost was my own dear friend."

"And then," said I, somewhat alarmed, "remember the danger Miss Lacroix is in of being plundered and disposed of whether she will or no."

"True for you, lad," said he. "Well, I suppose we must go through with it, and be as careful of th' old chap as we can."

I undertook to wait upon Jaques the three times a day (since Birley was occupied with his business until the evening), and to do my best to see that he was regularly supplied with his stimulative drink. On the evening of the first day of our experi-

ment Birley came to the cottage while I was engaged in the operation of rubbing in the brandy.

"I've been thinking," said he, "that th' old chap seems to tak' more notice of you than of me; I suppose he can see you're educated like himself! So you'd better ask him the questions and all that,—eh?"

I agreed to do so, but thought all questioning should be postponed for a day or two.

"Just try him with that paper again," said he.

I presented to Jaques' sight the question of the day before: —"*Do you remember your nephew Paul?*" I could not tell from the look of his eyes whether they seized it or not. His gaze, however, dwelt on it for some moments, then wavered and turned to me. Then his eyebrows twitched and his mouth made as if it would form speech, with the result, as usual, of only some inarticulate sounds like grunts. From this effort he desisted, and looked, unsteadily as a drunkard might look, at his right hand working in his lap.

The next night the same kind of thing was gone through, and the next, and the next. For nearly four days I had been constantly with the paralytic from morning till night, excepting only such intervals as I needed for hurried meals at my lodgings.

On the afternoon of the fifth day, while John was absent carrying his shell-fish round the village, and while I was assiduously rubbing Jaques' hand and arm with the brandy, a light tap came to the cottage door, the latch was immediately raised, and there entered of all persons the most unexpected—Steinhardt himself! I ought not to have been surprised at his appearance, for my frequent comings and goings to the cottage could not have passed unobserved in such a place as the village, and news of any kind, as everyone knows, in small and primitive communities, seems to propagate itself like fever. I had been throughout the day observing what I considered promising results of the stimulative treatment of my patient: his glance, I thought, was more alert and intelligent; his face had more of the healthy flush of blood than usual. And now what would be the result of this German invasion? for I had heard that Jaques had often expressed his dislike of Steinhardt in the days when he could speak for himself. I waited in anxiety. Steinhardt strode into the room in his masterful way, and casting a keen comprehensive glance around and on me,

came and stood in front of Jaques.

"You've found a new occupation, then, Mr. Unwin," said he. "Brandy—eh?"

"Not altogether new," I answered; "it is part of my duty to make myself of use to the old and the infirm."

While saying this I did not look at him; my attention was taken up with old Jaques, whose hand trembled in mine, and whose eyes scowled ominously on the intruder, while his face flushed and sounds of anger gurgled from his mouth.

"You disturb him, Mr. Steinhardt," I exclaimed. "For goodness sake move away, or he may have a fit!"—adding in thought, "and all I have done will be undone!"

Steinhardt moved out of the old man's view, looking disturbed himself. He pried about a little, even taking in his hand a blotting-pad which I had brought to the cottage to be ready for eventualities, and then saying, "I'm glad the old man is a little better," he went away. What had been his purpose in coming? Did he suspect my design? Did he know whether Jaques had anything to reveal?

The condition of the old man made me anxious. What with the accumulated effect of the stimulants administered, and the violent emotion produced in him by Steinhardt's appearance, his nerves seemed strung so tight, as it were, that I feared they might snap with their own tension. If Birley were only come we might now try to get some information! In the meantime I think my presence (to which by now the old man had got used) had as well a calming as sustaining effect upon him. Thus I sat waiting while the afternoon faded towards evening, and the old man sank into a doze—of a very spasmodic sort; for every now and then he woke up with a start, stared at me, and then glanced over his shoulder. I was in an agony of anxiety. What if the effects of his stimulation were thus passing away? I rose and took his hand—the hand which I had laboured to make responsive to his will and to my own. It was warm, but without any evident intention of active life as yet; after a moment or two I let it go and returned to my seat. When I again looked at the old man my heart leaped to see him, with a quiet, ghost-like interest take his left hand in his right and move it!

I scarce knew how I did it—my limbs trembled so!—but in a moment or two I had the blotting-pad with paper in Jaques' lap, and an easy quill

dipped in ink in his right hand. I presented to him the former question, and suggested with a motion of my hand that he should write an answer. He looked at the pen, and moved it in his fingers as if perplexed with its purpose. It dropped to the floor, and he laughed a strange laugh with little breath, the spasm of which lasted some moments. It sounded so uncanny and vacant that my flesh crept, and my heart sank. What if his wits were gone!

I restored the pen to his fingers, however, which this time grasped it as if they really meant to use it. He put the pen to the paper, and moved it in a wild uncontrolled stroke but it made no mark: the ink either would not flow or had been spilled on the floor. I took and dipped it, and again restored it to his fingers. Again he essayed to write, and again he made only a random, wavering stroke,—this time in ink. The result of his effort seemed to surprise and disappoint him. He frowned, shook his head weakly, grunted and tried again. These attempts he persisted in till the sheet of paper was covered with meaningless scrawls, —the last of which, however, showed some sign of being under a little control.

I had given him another sheet of paper, and he was resuming his efforts with something of grim determination in his look, —when I heard a footstep outside. Could it be Steinhardt returned? I flew to the door and locked it, just as a rap sounded on it. What should I do? I stood by the door, irresolute, with my breath coming quick, while I could hear the quill dashing and scraping on the paper. As I thus stood a shadow darkened the window, and I was exceedingly relieved to see Birley's bright face looking in. I admitted him and relocked the door; telling him hurriedly how Jaques was occupied, I enjoined him to keep silent and in the background.

I returned to Jaques; he had effected a combination of strokes which remotely resembled a letter "*W*"; with that his purpose or his energy had failed him, and he sat regarding it with unsteady satisfaction. What now was to be done with him? Perhaps the unwonted application had for the time exhausted both hand and brain: I gave him some of his milk with brandy to drink. He rested a little, and then of his own accord resumed his pen. That done he paused and looked at me in plaintive perplexity, and then away from me with a

wandering glance, which suddenly included Birley, who could not stay longer in the background.

"Let him see your paper," said Birley.

Again I presented the question: "*Do you remember your nephew Paul?*"

Now, whether it was the question or the sight of Birley that struck some chord of recollection, I do not venture an opinion: I but record what happened. But quickly he wrote, as if the question might escape him before he had fixed it on the paper, in thick strokes which were with difficulty kept within bounds—

"*Paul, where is he?*" (I, of course, have added the punctuation.)

I had no time or even thought to give then to the success of our attempt thus far;—it must be pushed farther, and at once, while the old man was alert, or it would still be no more than failure. His question must be answered, and in few words: in what words? The dusk was drawing on; Birley lit the gas, and drew down the blind, and I wrote in large clear letters as in my question:—

"*He is lost; help us to find him.*"

He clutched the paper in his own hand when I presented it, and eagerly pored on the words. He raised his head, and uttered some rapid sounds. I shook my head and wrote again—"*Write.*" And again he compelled his pen to form words:—

"*Lost where?*"

I wrote carefully, while my head throbbed and my fingers trembled with the desire to make haste:—

"*We do not know——*"

There I paused: we had reached the turning-point of our inquiry. If Jaques had little knowledge of the passing of time (as he very likely had), if he remembered or noticed but few of the details of any occasion (as he probably did), in what way could the question best be put, or approached, whether he had seen his nephew on the night of March 16, 1882?

I appealed to Birley, pointing out the hopelessness of expecting the paralytic to remember dates. His face lengthened; neither he nor I had reckoned sufficiently with this in our haste to bring Jaques into a condition for inquiry. To ask point-blank the question, "When did you see him last?" would be utter, fruitless folly. What then? The old man for some moments watched me narrowly; then his eyes became disengaged, and he seemed slipping away into dull forgetfulness. The fear of losing

our chance stimulated me: I added at a venture to what I had already written and presented to the old man:—

"——*we think you saw him last.*"

The effect of this answer to his question was not at once apparent in Jaques. He regarded it with evident perplexity for a little, and then, with trembling head and brightening eyes, he poured out a stream of uncouth, unintelligible sounds,—in the midst of which a hand tried the latch of the door, and then a knock sounded. After inquiry I admitted John, who stared bewildered at his master's occupation. As soon as Jaques caught sight of him his voluble utterance increased in vehemence. I did not interfere; there was just a possibility that the faithful old servant would find some meaning in the sounds that were unintelligible to me. But he did not.

"Eh? What?" he repeatedly demanded. At length, exasperated, he exclaimed, "Ha' done, master, wi' such gibberish! What's got you now?" and looked at me with some suspicion.

I explained quickly to John what we were about, and told him his master had just read what I had written: that we wanted to know when he had seen his nephew last.

"Th' day he went away, to be sure. I remember weel; he gave me a sovereign to get some things."

"But," said I, "we think he may have seen him after that."

"Ee, how could he, if he wasna to be seen?"

"That's just what we want to find out," said I.

"Weel," said John, "did Master Paul bring him aught; he'll remember that fast enough."

I seized at once the suggestion, and taking the paper from Jaques (who was now silent again), I wrote:—

"*What present did Paul bring you the last time?*"

He considered my question, looked at the travelling rug about his shoulders, and then glanced inquiringly at John.

"Nay, master," said John, into his ear; "he brought you that long afore."

To make sure he understood the contradiction, I wrote under what I had already written, "*No; not the rug.*"

Again he mumbled and looked at John, and evidently strove to rouse his feeble recollection. After some moments' anxious waiting, his mouth worked, an odd laugh came from him, and his eye sparkled, while he wrote in strokes as difficult as before—

"*The papers—on the bed.*"

Here at last was something worth attention: "the papers"—what papers?

I read the answer aloud.

"Nay," said John, "there's no papers in th' bed. Happen he means he was in bed at th' time."

If that were so it tallied with my suspicion of a midnight visit. Where, then, were these papers? Were they newspapers or documents? John knew nothing about them. If Master Paul ever brought a newspaper it would sure to be "burnt for kindling." The while I was cross-questioning John, Jaques looked first at the one and then at the other, and occasionally tried to carry his look over his shoulder. Birley was the first to notice this.

"Turn him round," said he.

We turned him round, chair and all. At once his eyes were fixed on an old oak cupboard, of a kind common in Lancashire cottages, that was fastened in one of the angles of the room. I asked John whether there were and papers there. He did not know; we might look. I stood on a chair, and turned the key which was in the lock, and open the door. I saw only some cups and saucers of cracked china, two or three tea-pots with broken spouts, and other damaged specimens of crockery ware—nothing like paper, or papers. Standing on tip toe, however, I noticed a roll of something pushed well back on the top shelf. With eager, trembling hand I reached up and forward and brought it out. Its upper surface was covered with black dust. It was tied about with string. In a moment I had the dust off somehow and the string cut, and there lay before me the front picture page of the well-known Paris "comic" paper—*Le Journal Amusant.* Eagerly I looked up in the corner for the date. I read and read again to make sure that I was right—"11 MARS 1882."

"Thank God!" I exclaimed, sinking into a chair. "We were right: he did come home."

Beneath that paper were two or three copies of *Le petit Journal pour Rire*, with its tinted sketches; these were undated in front (according, I believe, to their wont). Beneath them again was a copy of *Le Monde Illustré.* These were all weeklies; but under them, wrapping them about when rolled up, was a copy of *Le Figaro* (a daily paper), in the upper corner of which I read—"JEUDI (Thursday), 16 MARS 1882."

"He came in here that night," said I. "This evidence is conclusive! Very likely Mr. Lacroix put them on that shelf himself,

intending to show them to his uncle some other time!"

I gave the papers to Jaques, who had been watching me with greedy look and impatient hand. He fixed his attention on their pictures as eagerly as a boy, and for the time, no doubt, forgot about the loss of his nephew.

"Don't you think," said Birley, "we should make out an affidavit or summat, afore we ha' done?"

Accepting this suggestion I took a sheet of paper and wrote—

"*I, Jaques Lacroix, hereby declare that I received the accompanying papers from the hand of my nephew Paul Lacroix, viz.,* LE FIGARO, *of date* 16*th March,* 1882, LE JOURNAL AMUSANT, *of date* 11*th March,* 1882, *etc.*"

This I presented to Jaques, and began pointing with the pen to each word in succession, so that he might weigh the import of what I wished him to sign. But he resented this tutoring; he took the pen from me, and pushed my hand away. I was astonished to see him (though with shaky pen and in blotchy fashion) carat a "*De*" before the "*Lacroix*" of his own name and his nephew's, and then refer to the papers to see that the dates were quoted correctly. I was, therefore, not surprised to see him sign the declaration—"Jaques De Lacroix."

"Ah," said Birley, "th' old chap knows what he's about."

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CHAPTER XII.

A "TIMES" ADVERTISEMENT.

THE anxiety and excitement of those five days had been so great for me that for some little time I was almost prostrate. I need scarcely say I was much encouraged by our success with Jaques. I had the papers with his signed declaration (witnessed, of course, by Birley and myself) securely locked away in my desk. This should have stimulated me to immediate further exertion, and, I have no doubt, would have, had I not been still eaten up with anxiety about Louise. What if the hope I cherished as the

end of all this—the hope of taking her from the fears and dangers that hung about her, of having her as my very own, my wife!—what if this hope was being baulked while I was thus busy? The mere thought of such a contingency was enough to bring my fabric of careful evidence regarding the Lacroix mystery to naught. If I could only discover where she was!—and that she still thought of me, as I fondly believed she had done a little while she was yet in Timperley!—still refused to yield to the cajoleries and threats of Steinhardt, and hoped I would deliver her! But I had no news, and I was devoured with anxiety.

No news, except the confirmation from Birley that she was not with Mrs. Steinhardt. He had written to his sister, inquiring about Louise, and had been answered to that effect; Mrs. Steinhardt had reason for supposing she was in Blackpool, but at what address she could not say.

I entreated Birley to go to Blackpool to endeavour to find out, if he could spare the time. But he needed no entreaty, for he himself was also becoming anxious about her.

"I mun spare the time," said he; "and I mun go and find her. It's, of course, no use asking 'Manuel where she is."

But before he had arranged to set out, something occurred which obviated the necessity of going, and produced results of a more remarkable sort. And this I must proceed to relate.

As I have already indicated, my experience of the way in which such evidence as I had regarding Lacroix's fate had rather come to me than been found by me, tended to make me what I may call "a waiter upon Providence." I conceived—I may say, I was convinced—I should best attain further result by keeping myself open to evidence more than by ranging about and racking my brain in search of it. All fear being at rest that our experiment upon old Jaques might have fatal or untoward results (he was now more alert than ever, and frequently asked, in writing, for "the girl"), I had betaken myself to a former habit, and every day almost went into the town to the Free Library to read. Sometimes I read a book, and sometimes the newspapers.

I was thus occupied one afternoon with *The Times*. I turned with a curiosity which was half listless to the "agony column," and my attention was at once arrested by this:—

"To EMMANUEL STEINHARDT in England. — Emilie Haas in Basel send this. Though

you may have forgotten I not you. I am in very much trouble and fear from you, many times since first, now again. Come to me, come, before the 'Too late' must be gewritten." (A Basel address was appended.)

Was it not natural that I should at once think this was addressed to the Emmanuel Steinhardt I knew? There might be others of the name in England, but surely no other to whom the implication, which I read between the lines of this advertisement, of broken faith with a woman would so well apply. And she seemed in urgent distress; she begged him to go to her. It was scarcely probable, I thought, that Steinhardt would see it; he read little of newspaper literature, I knew, and his usual paper was the local daily. What then? In spite of my abhorrence of him, and my wish to avoid him, should I not, for the woman's sake, inform him of this? I pondered this idea all the rest of the day, until the evening, when I took it to Birley.

"Certainly," said he; "the scamp! let him know of it. I suppose he only married my sister because she had a bit of brass."

So I called on Steinhardt that very evening.

"Thank you, Mr. Unwin," said he, when I had told him my errand; "but some kind friend has already sent me the paper" (taking up a copy of *The Times*). "Yes," he continued, reading it over and chuckling at its composition; "I suppose she thought she must write English for an English paper. (He laid the paper down.) "Poor Emilie, she wants me; but I can't go, you know. I must go to London about my lawsuit again. I might send Frank, but I really want him here." He paused and looked at me meditatively. "You are doing nothing, Mr. Unwin. Would you go for me? You would, really and truly, do better than I should. She thinks she would like to see me and speak to me, but she wouldn't. She seems to be very ill,—dying, I suppose she thinks herself, poor woman!—and to speak to people sick and dying is more in your way than mine. She will like to hear you; she always liked clergymen; she liked me a little when we thought I was going to be a —a clergyman."

He turned slowly to the fire, took up the poker, and carefully raked out the ashes from the bottom of the grate. Was memory leading him back reluctantly to those days of his youth, and compelling him to

ask himself whether for all he had gained since then he had not paid too great a price?

"Well," said he, manifestly shaking something off, and turning to me, "what do you say, Mr. Unwin? I will, of course, pay your expenses, and you will take to Emilie a letter from me, and money,—I daresay she means she needs it."

"I am much obliged to you, Mr. Steinhardt," said I, "but——"

"Oh," said he, "it is I will be obliged, but of course that does not matter."

"It is so unexpected," I continued; I might have added, "and extraordinary."

"Well, yes; I daresay it is. But you know what the Frenchman says about the unexpected."

"Let me consider it for a day; and if I decide to go I shall be ready to set out at once."

"Oh, yes; consider it and consult your friends. But if you do not go, nobody will go."

I went immediately from him to Birley, and stated at once the extraordinary offer I had received.

"Go, lad," said he; "it will be a pleasant holiday for you, and the poor woman, of course, would rather see somebody from 'Manuel than only get a letter from him."

I hesitated; I did not desire a holiday then, even on the Continent where I had never been, but at the same time some change was becoming necessary considering the low condition to which my finances had sunk.

"But," said I, "I believe he has asked me only to get me out of the way for some purpose. I think he suspects I have been finding out something more."

"And what does that matter?" asked Birley. "Look here, my lad; I know you're in a way about Louise. Now, it strikes me if you go away for a little while (and you may as well go at 'Manuel's expense) things will turn out better for you than you may think. You see, at the same time as you are away, he is away, too. Frank must come back to the works, and there will be no reason for keeping Louise at Blackpool. Take my word for it, he'll bring her home; I shall manage to see her, and if she claims my protection as her other guardian, I shall tak' her home with me, and when he comes back he can't tak' her from me. Don't you see, lad?"

"But," I again objected, "I feel I ought to stay here to attend to that other matter."

"Oh, that can wait," said he, "it will take no harm for a week or two."

I admitted the force of the reasons he urged, and all next

day (which was Sunday) I turned them over. My going might certainly be to Louise's advantage and to my own. Even if Steinhardt brought her back to Timperley only for a visit of a few days, there would be sufficient opportunity for Birley to take her home to himself. On the other hand, my refusal to go would bring no advantage nor prospect of advantage. And might not, indeed, Steinhardt's offer be a suggestion of Providence?

So on Monday morning I called on Steinhardt and said I was ready to set out at once, and in the afternoon I was whirling through beautiful Derbyshire on my way to London and the Continent. I could not forbear feeling something like delight at the change from terrible Timperley to these bright scenes, although I scarcely knew where I was journeying, or for what. Could I then have guessed what strange things I would hear when I reached the to me unknown city of Basel on the Rhine, could I have guessed that I was being hurried along by the Divine Vengeance, that I was not so much deputed by Steinhardt to see Emilie Haas as by that Overruling Power who was impelling that man on to his doom, what, I have often wondered since, would my feelings have been as I was borne along with rush and roar in the railway train?

The first night of my journey I rested in London. I went to that hotel (*Bacon's*) in Great Queen Street, where Mr. Lacroix had commonly stayed on his visits to London. I had a vague hope of hearing or finding something concerning him which might be of use. I even asked that I might have the room which he had last occupied. When shut into it for the night I almost wished I had asked for any other rather than that. The aspect of its sombre, heavy, old fashioned furniture gave me a chill creepy sensation. Many men, doubtless, had slept in it since the night of March 15th, 1882, but I could only see it as if it had been tenanted last by Mr. Lacroix, and think of his silent presence pervading it. I must even confess that I furtively looked into drawers and corners, as if there might still be left some trace of him, but I found nothing of more consequence than a shirt-button, and a shirt-stud or two, which might have belonged to anyone.

I left Victoria Station next morning, at ten o'clock, by the continental mail train, and soon was travelling in the October sunshine, through my own England of the south, towards

Dover. The sea was pretty smooth so that, when I landed at Calais, I was free to consider the sensation of being for the first time in a foreign land. But we were rapidly whirled away towards Amiens. About dusk I was surprised to find myself journeying across a district which in many ways resembled the Lancashire I had left. Somewhere in or near this region, at a station called Teignier (it was quite dark when we reached it), half an hour was allowed for dinner, and then we sped on again,—on and on, through the weary, cold night, over the land of grapes and wine, till I was roused by the announcement that we were at the famous town of Belfort. But nothing of its fame or strength was to be gathered from its station; and as the train moved on again I sank back into my corner, and fell into a fitful doze, in which I was half conscious of the rush of the train, and half dreaming of being with Louise in a Belfort dungeon, in which Steinhardt had shut us up, and from which we were endeavouring to work our way out, after the manner of the old prisoner in Dumas' "Monte Cristo." I was wretched, cold, and hungry, when, about seven o'clock in the morning, I left the train at Basel. I permitted myself to be taken to a hotel, where I ordered breakfast; after partaking of which I revived, and began to think of the errand on which I had come.

Since my arrival I had been uncertainly using French and German, and I had been answered in either language (I found later that in the hotel, at least, I might as well use my native English); but on inquiring my way from the Ludwigstrasse to the obscure street I sought, I had to draw exclusively upon my stock of German. I discovered that Fräulein Emilie Haas lived in one of a row of old tall houses (not unlike some of those in the city of Edinburgh), with little windows in the steep grey roofs, which gave the impression of eyes with sleepy, heavy lids. Up and up the bare stairs of the house I stepped, till I think I was on the fourth floor—at any rate, I was as high as I could climb. I knocked at the door of a humble "apartment" of two rooms, and an old wrinkled woman appeared. I inquired in German for Fräulein Haas, and was informed she was from home, "giving her daily lessons." She was not, then, ill? Oh, no, she was not ill—she was well. I asked when she would be at home, and was told "at five o'clock in the afternoon." So I departed till then, with about six hours in which to

tax my ingenuity in guessing why Fräulein Haas' demand to see Steinhardt had been so urgent, since she was not dying, nor even ill.

At five o'clock I called again, and found Fräulein Haas at home. I was asked to come in —into a plainly, indeed, according to English notions, poorly furnished room, with a scrap of worn carpet in the middle of its white-boarded floor. I looked curiously at the Fräulein. She was a middle-aged woman, of the thin, nervous type of German (or, perhaps, Swiss), with bright, keen, grey eyes. She rose, smiling, but perplexed to receive me, and waited for me to state my business.

"I come from England," I said in German.

"Then you do not want me to give lessons?" said she, pushing away a "prospectus" evidently laid ready for presentation, "my mother thought you had come for that."

"No," said I, "I come from England to see you, and then to go back again."

She looked bewildered. I took from my pocket a copy of *The Times* advertisement, and handed it to her. At once the expression of her face changed; pale before, it became paler now and her eyes seemed to dilate as with fear.

"But you," said she, "are not Emmanuel Steinhardt? Perhaps, however," she made haste to add, "you are his son? He married, I know."

I shook my head.

"I am no relation at all to Herr Steinhardt. Very likely that will explain who I am." And I gave her Steinhardt's letter.

She was moved when she saw the handwriting. She read the letter through eagerly. It was short, I could see.

"He thinks I am ill and in want of money—of his *money!* Ach! this will never do. You must go away, sir!"

CHAPTER XIII.

FRÄULEIN HAAS.

I WAS so taken aback I could for the moment neither stir nor speak, while a new feeling, a feeling of shame, arose in me for appearing in that woman's presence as Steinhardt's representative.

After her outburst of surprise she looked at the letter again and at me. I rose uncertain.

"Fräulein," I said, "I do not know what to say. I did not seek to come this journey myself; Herr Steinhardt asked me to undertake it. He thought, and I thought, too, that your advertisement, in which of course you could not use many words, signified that you were very ill, and alone perhaps, and that you needed a——" (I did not quite know how to put it; I added hurriedly)—"a friendly hand."

"He did not think I could wish to see him for his own sake—I mean for the sake of his own peace?"

Her German was becoming too rapid for me to follow without an effort; I was not sure I understood her.

"He has business," I said, "which prevented him from coming himself."

"I suppose," said she, with some touch of bitterness, I thought, "he is still always very busy making more and more money in your rich England?"

"It is now," I answered, "a lawsuit that keeps him in England."

"A lawsuit? A trial?" she exclaimed, with a strange anxiety. "Is he in danger?"

"Indeed, Fräulein, I do not know. The other party to the trial thinks himself in danger from Herr Steinhardt; he accuses Herr Steinhardt of using, and making much money by using, his Patent for chemical dyes."

"I think," said she, simply, "you are not Emmanuel's friend."

To this I had nothing to say for a moment. I took refuge in an evasion.

"Herr Steinhardt," I said, "has sent me to act as his representative. But it appears there is nothing for me to do." (I was still standing uncertain, but ready to go.) "What shall I say to him when I return?"

"I wonder," said she, more than half to herself, "if you are the person I have seen lately?"

I was startled; I stared in blank bewilderment. Was the woman a maniac? The pupils of her keen eyes seemed to rapidly dilate and contract, while she gazed into vacancy, and at the same time kept a referring glance on me.

"A man," she continued, "who goes here and there, and evidently causes Emmanuel great anxiety about something."

Conceive the sudden turmoil of thought and feeling, of imagination and hope into which I was thus thrown! The Lacroix mystery was until then almost absent from my mind; I seemed to have left it in England, and though I certainly thought of it sometimes, it was as of something waiting in the distance for my return. Now here was I presented with an allusion to it—a vague and uncertain allusion, perhaps, but still unmistakably for me an allusion—here in an attic of an old house in Basel! What strange coincidence was this? Who was this woman that brought it before me again? I was afraid to speak or to stir, lest I should break or dispel that filmy something her fancy or her vision had got touch of.

"You are a pastor," she continued, looking at me with more natural eyes; Emmanuel calls you 'Reverend Mr. Unwin.' It is surely, sir, a pastor's duty to bring repentance and forgiveness and peace to the hearts of men, and not pride and fear and condemnation!"

"You say very strange things, Fräulein," I answered; "I think—I hope I understand what you mean. Perhaps I deserve your rebuke. But are you sure you altogether know the terrible mystery?"

"Ach!" she cried. "There is then a mystery?—and part of the burden of it is with me! Ach! mein Gott! mein Gott!"

"If you know"—I impulsively began, in ill-suppressed excitement.

"I do not know anything!" she cried, suddenly interrupting me, and springing to her feet. She paced nervously up and down the room, her fingers wildly playing with each other, or about her arms and her head. She stopped and looked at me, trembling in every limb and nerve. "You must go away, sir!"

I lingered uncertainly.

"Please to go away, sir!" she urged. "I cannot bear more now. Come again to-morrow. It may be that my God has sent you to me!"

I withdrew without a word, somewhat awed by the emotion

of the strange woman. As I closed the door, I caught a glimpse of her with hands clasped and face raised, as if in entreaty or thankfulness.

After leaving the house I walked for a long time, without knowing whither I went, about the streets of Basel and along the Rhine bank. A north-west wind swept up the valley, ruffling the waters of the famous river; it sounded to me as the voice from England of that Divine Vengeance which surely had sent me to this distant foreign town as its messenger! Strange and awful it would be if fresh or confirmatory evidence of a deed done in obscure Timperley in Lancashire were indeed forthcoming so far away as this. I exhausted all my ingenuity in guesses as to what Fräulein Haas could know, and how she could have come by the knowledge. But she had declared she knew nothing! Was that the truth? or was it merely an emphatic use of the word "*know*"? Or was the woman, perhaps, a harmless maniac—a maniac of the pietist kind? Considered in the light of what I now knew, her very advertisement seemed a whimsical, mad composition. What she had said to me was certainly marked by the self-contradictions of a person of disjointed thought:—She knew nothing about me, and yet she wondered whether she had not seen me lately; she appealed to me on reasonable-seeming grounds to desist from following up the clue of evidence which seemed to lead to the incrimination of Steinhardt; she declared "part of the burden of it" was on her, and yet she knew nothing about it. All this was passing strange, and I could only conclude to wait and hear what she might have to say the next evening.

In spite of my excitement I slept well that night. I spent the next day until evening wandering about the town, examining the windows of its sleepy shops, wondering at the contented, bi-lingual shopkeepers, and gazing at the glorious Swiss mountains which I was so near, yet which I must not think of visiting.

I was again at the old house with the watchful, but heavy eyes soon after five o'clock. Poor Fräulein Haas seemed to have passed both a sleepless night and a weary day. She was evidently ill at ease and anxious, and I pitied her.

"I fear, Fräulein," I said, "the thought of me and my presence give you pain. What you may have to say to me I do not know, I am not able to guess; but it seems saying it will give you great pain."

"We must not care if we give ourselves pain to do right—must we, Herr Pastor?" she said, with a smile of singular sweetness.

"No," I answered; "but I would wish to lighten your pain, Fräulein, if I can."

"I thank you," she said; "it may be that you can. But first I must say this one thing: Emmanuel Steinhardt, of Brisach, was very much to me many years ago. He went away to England, but you will understand, Herr Pastor, I have never forgotten him. For the first time I knew he was in very great danger and anxiety about a year and a half ago"—(I almost started from my seat: that was the very time of Lacroix's disappearance!)—"I learned it in a dream, indeed—dreams, which the Almighty God sends oftener and clearer to His chosen ones than to other persons." (She was, then, a pietist, if not a maniac.) "His danger and anxiety then, I suppose, passed away, for soon I saw no more of them. But now for many weeks I see him, and feel him more and more anxious than before, and I am made to feel there is always now another man near him making him anxious and afraid, and the other man seems to be you, I think, Herr Pastor."

I sat silently marvelling.

"I tell you all this plainly, Herr Pastor," she added, "because you are not one of those who laugh at dreams; for you know that the Sacred Scripture says that the great God reveals, to those who are ready to see, many strange things in dreams and visions of the night."

"You have, indeed," I said, "seen strange things."

"Will you now," she continued, "be plain with me? Tell me, if you know, exactly what is the thing—the serious matter—he is anxious and afraid about."

"I can tell you, Fräulein," I said, "a very serious matter, about the discovery of which I suspect he is very anxious. A little more than a year and a half ago Herr Steinhardt's partner in business went to London from Lancashire, and it was thought he never returned: no trace of him could be found. So his fate remained altogether a mystery for a year, until I went to be *vicaire* in the village. Why the mystery should have been left so long, I cannot say, because it was no great cleverness in me that after that made it less of a mystery; perhaps the Almighty left it so long to give Emmanuel Steinhardt time to repent. Soon after I came to the village certain things made me suspect that Herr Steinhardt's partner did not stay in London, but came home, and

then disappeared. I now know, from evidence I have got, that he did; but what became of him I cannot tell. I suspect that Herr Steinhardt put him out of the way, but I do not yet know that he did. I am sure, however, that the Divine Vengeance, which thus far has revealed it to me bit by bit, will yet make clear the whole horrible crime."

She heard me through in silence, gazing intently at me the while; but when I came to the end, she drew back and looked at me in anger and astonishment.

"But," she said, "who are you, Herr Pastor, to make yourself the minister of Divine Vengeance? Is it not a pastor's duty to speak rather of Divine Forgiveness than of Divine Vengeance?

I was dumb for a moment under this warm rebuke.

"I think, Fräulein," I said at length, "you mistake me. I do not put myself forward as the agent of Divine Vengeance. I first began to look into the mystery at the request of the missing man's orphan daughter, who longs to know what has become of her father; since then all I have learned concerning his fate has been revealed to me with little or no effort on my part."

"Ach! Mein Gott!" she exclaimed. "The poor man has left a daughter!"

"Yes," I replied; "and Herr Steinhardt, who is her guardian, uses her very cruelly. If it were not for that, I think I should let the whole matter rest, and take no more part at all in bringing the crime home to the guilty man. But so long as she is in danger I must do what I can—I must let the Divine Power use me. God has sent me to you, Fräulein; if you then have had anything more revealed to you than I yet know, I beg you will tell it me."

"Ach, Herr Pastor!" she cried, "you know not what you ask! You ask me to condemn Emmanuel Steinhardt!—*me* to condemn him! Ach! Gott! —mein Gott! why hast Thou laid this on me?"

She clasped her hands in her lap and looked fixedly before her.

"Fräulein," I ventured to urge, "I only wish to hinder Steinhardt from going on his cruel, unscrupulous way."

"What you may wish, Herr Pastor," she said, with her look still fixed on vacancy, "will not matter very much. The great God, I know, is a God of justice as well as of mercy, and He will work His own will with both you and me! I have prayed for Emmanuel as a mother might

for her only son! Surely my God will hear me! If he only had time and warning to repent! Oh, was not that why I wished him to come!"

"What can I say, Fräulein, to lessen your pain?"

"You can say nothing, Herr Pastor. Leave me for to-night—leave me, if you please! I cannot speak to you more now!"

Hers was such distress and emotion as could only be calmed by her being left alone—alone, or only with that Unseen Presence in whom she was doubtless wont to seek strength and peace. I therefore went away without another word, and accompanied for a time by the painful doubt whether it were well to pursue my inquiry, since it caused her such pain; whether there were not even something vindictive in following up evidence which would lead to the incrimination of even such a villain as Steinhardt.

But all doubt was dispelled by a letter I received next morning from Birley.

"Thou must come back, my lad, at once," he wrote. "I was mistaken in my notion that 'Manuel would bring you know who back home. Frank came home the same day you left; and his father went off to London next morning. I managed to get to see Frank. He is in very low spirits, poor lad! His father has almost scared him into marrying the girl; but I don't quite think he can bring that about without asking me, at any rate. I shall not be at all surprised if he does ask me one of these days, for he has not yet come down near so hard on me—you know what I mean—as I expected. I fancy he wants to reserve the chance of a last big squeeze. But don't thou be afraid, lad; I'll stand by the lass and thee. Well, I prevailed on Frank to tell me the Blackpool address, though I had to promise that his father shouldn't get to know he had told me. I went straight away and found her; and she was main glad to see me, poor thing! I told her what I had come for; and the end of it was she packed up her little traps and came back with me—and here she is with me now. But I've not come to the end yet. 'Manuel has only gone to London for the week, I find. He will be home on Saturday; and then I expect he will want me to square up with him. So I say you had better come back at once."

Here, surely, was matter for the gravest anxiety and apprehension, though it did not appear what there was to fear exactly, except that Steinhardt might somehow reclaim Louise from

Birley's charge, and again hide her away. But the fact is, my dread and suspicion of Steinhardt were such that I was prepared for his committing the greatest and vaguest enormities. It was now Friday morning, and there was only another day during which I could think of Louise as at rest in Birley's house. I could leave Basel that night by the mail train, and probably reach Timperley late on Saturday night. Greater speed could not be made. But was I, after all, going to leave without knowing what was that damning something concerning Steinhardt which Fräulein Haas' "dream, or dreams," might reveal or suggest? I must endeavour to win it from her.

I called that morning, but was told, as on the first occasion, she would not be at home till five o'clock in the afternoon. I got everything ready at my hotel for a prompt departure, and called again soon after the hour named.

"So you have come again," she said, wearily, when she saw me.

"Yes, Fräulein," I answered; "and I have come in haste."

"To urge me, I know. But why is it necessary? It is a terrible law that quick death should be brought upon one man because he brought quick death on another!—a terrible law! I am not sure it is God's law. Think you it is, Herr Pastor?"

"Fräulein!" I exclaimed, alarmed at her continued disposition to consider too curiously and abstrusely, "I am sorry I cannot linger to discuss such things with you. I must travel back to England in a very few hours, on most anxious business, and I entreat you to resolve to tell me what you say has been revealed to you concerning this crime. I have said to you already, Fräulein, and I say it again: what the great God may have in store for Herr Steinhardt for all his wickedness I cannot judge, and I do not seek to put out my hand to force; I say I do not desire to bring punishment on him, I only wish to be able to make him withdraw his hand from the perpetration of more cruelty and oppression."

"Is he so wicked, then?" she cried, in an accent of the keenest pain.

"It is not for me, Fräulein," I answered, "to say how wicked he is. But I have told you he is behaving very harshly to the dead man's daughter—more than harshly, for he has even hid her away in a strange town, to try every means to make her marry his son, in order that he may not have to give an account of the dead man's property. And

here is a letter which I have received this morning from her other guardian, who was Herr Steinhardt's best friend when first he came to England, and whom he has almost ruined. He has found the young lady and taken her to his own house; but he fears he cannot keep her, for Herr Steinhardt may now ruin him outright. I must therefore return; and this, Fräulein, is my only hope of effectually hindering Herr Steinhardt from doing what he will—by frightening him with my knowledge. But I do not yet know enough to do that."

It will thus be seen that I told Fräulein Haas just enough of the case to convince her of its urgency; but she guessed something I had not told her.

"I understand now, Herr Pastor," she said, "why you are so interested in Emmanuel Steinhardt's crime; it is more love than vengeance that pushes you on. And that, too, Herr Pastor, will make you understand better why I am interested in Emmanuel Steinhardt," she said, simply, looking not at me but at her thin clasped hands. "He was many years ago not the Herr Steinhardt he seems to be now, he was good and gentle, though his heart and mind were set on being rich. But I detain you," she added, glancing up suddenly. Her hands tightened their clasp on each other. "If," she said, with rapidly growing vehemence, "I tell you what I have seen in order that you may be able to deliver the distressed young Fräulein, promise me, Herr Pastor, for the sake of my past, and as you hope to be happy and peaceful in the future—promise me that you will use what I tell you only for the purpose you say, and that you will keep it, so far as ever you can, from becoming public."

I gave the promise at once and without reserve.

"And," she said, "you will leave Emmanuel Steinhardt's punishment in the hands of Almighty God?"

I answered, I would—though it was a strange question to have to answer. She then turned almost away from me, partly, I thought, that she might be less conscious of my presence, but more that she might concentrate her attention on her recollections. Her hands clasped and unclasped several times before they settled the one in the other and she began—

"It was, I think, in the March month of a year ago, I had slept a long time very soundly, for I had been very tired, when suddenly I felt as if I were taken up and carried away—far away; and I was made to look at Em-

manuel Steinhardt. He looked at me as if he wished me to help him. At his feet was a large wooden box, the lid of which, I was somehow made to understand, would not close. From the opening protruded a human hand, strangely discoloured. I awoke all trembling. I put out my hand to make certain I was in my own bed; my mother was sleeping quietly by me. I tried to dismiss the vision from my mind—foolish dream I thought it. But I could sleep no more. In two or three hours it was daylight and I arose. I went about my duties all the day as usual. I was busy, and had the impression of the vision much worn away when I went to bed in the evening — rather early because I was very tired. I had slept not very long, when again I was as if seized up and whirled away. Again, to see Emmanuel Steinhardt with something at his feet again—not now the wooden box, which was aside, but three packages of canvas. Again, Emmanuel Steinhardt looked at me, as if he wished me to go to him, and again I awoke all trembling."

She paused in her story of the visions, took her handkerchief and wiped her damp brow with trembling hand. I watched her intently: a sensation of creeping excitement and mystery held me bound to her quiet but intense recital. She resumed suddenly, without looking at me.

"I slept no more that night for thinking of what I had seen, and so I saw Emmanuel Steinhardt no more; I tried to sleep in order that I might, but I could not. A terrible night to me it was. But next night I was sleeping a light, disturbed sleep, when I was taken away again to Emmanuel Steinhardt; this time I knew I was not in a room: there was no light. He looked at me across a newly dug spot of ground, and then turned away. I did not really wake, though I felt conscious I was in my own bed at the same time as I was held where he had left me, close to a wall. After some time—how long I cannot tell—he came back with a rope. I knew at once what he was going to do before he had done it—fasten the rope in an iron something on the other side of the wall and pull it over. I do not know why I did not think it impossible for a single man to pull a wall down with a rope, but I did not. In a little while he pulled, and the wall fell flat, and, curiously unbroken, covering over the newly dug spot and all around it. Then I awoke, as with the noise, and slept no more. After that night I saw him again for several nights, for a dim moment or two, at the

same place. They were but glimpses, which, as the nights passed on, became dimmer and dimmer, and then ceased altogether—until some weeks ago, when again I was summoned to face him at that same place with the fallen wall. He looked at me earnestly, and then over his shoulder at some one whom I did not see, but who I knew he feared was watching him. This happened three, four times, and then no more. There has been no more yet, but what may be, God only knows. That is all," she said, with a sigh, as of relief, turning to me. "And now, Herr Pastor, you know what I have had to tell, and you will not forget your promise to me—you will not set yourself to bring punishment on Emmanuel Steinhardt."

"I shall hold my promise to you, Fräulein," said I, "as sacred."

Possessed as I was with the exciting thoughts engendered by her story, I was almost forgetting that I had no result of my mission which I could show or tell to Steinhardt, and the time at my disposal must be very short. I looked at my watch: I had half an hour to spare. There was no time for the expression of wonder, or of any kind of fitting comment upon what I had heard. Seeing me look at my watch, she rose.

"And now," she said, "you must go quickly, I suppose, to your hotel, and then to the station."

"Yes," I said. "But there is one thing, Fräulein, I had almost forgotten; not of a painful sort," I made haste to add, for she had re-assumed her expression of close endurance and resignation. "I came as Herr Steinhardt's messenger, and I have no message I can carry back to him."

She sat down again, took a sheet of paper from a drawer, and wrote in the middle of the page, in a small German hand, a few words, which she signed. When she had written she handed the paper to me, saying, "You may read." I read (the words were in German)—

"*Repent, and turn away from your evil, before it is too late.*"

This, enclosed in an envelope, and addressed, I put in my pocket for Steinhardt. There remained now but one thing for me to do—to say farewell to Fräulein Haas, the poor, lonely lady, who still with fond regret cherished her memory of the man who was to me the greatest villain on earth. How I longed I could do something to cheer her life, say even some proper word of comfort and hope! But I felt her spirit dwelt on heights too great for any commonplace words of consolation from me to

reach. I therefore bade her a silent farewell. She held my hand a moment.

"If anything happens to him," she said, "you will send me word?"

I answered, I would; and the next moment she was turned away from me, and the next I was out of the room, and had seen my last of Fräulein Haas.

When I was in the train, rushing back towards England, I unexpectedly found that I was bearing away with me a pathetic memento of her, and that I had left her a memento of myself. I put my hand into my pocket to find Birley's letter, but could find only the following lithographed form, instead. I suppose I had taken it from her table when I meant to take up the letter which I had laid down. The poor lady might have been looking at it before I entered her room. This was the form :—

* "*Meine Verlobung mit Fräulein Emilie Haas von Liestal zeige ich hiemit ergebenst an*

Basel, November, 1854.

"*Emmanuel Steinhardt.*"

—:o:—

CHAPTER XIV.

A MEETING WITH A HAPPY END.

In what a fever of excitement, anxiety, and hope I made the journey home I need not stay to describe. The story of Lacroix's fate I could now fill in to its last detail: I knew where his mutilated remains had been buried — or, at least, I knew a spot which coincided with that described by Fräulein Haas—so what remained for me to do was to bring the fact of my knowledge home to Steinhardt in a manner so forcible that he could not refuse to make terms with me; more than this I could not accomplish, even if I would, considering my promise to Fräulein Haas. But in the sequel I had my conviction re-impressed that I was in this business but the agent of a Higher Power. "Man proposes, but God disposes."

I reached Timperley very late on Saturday night, but, in spite of the lateness of the hour and

* "My engagement with Fräulein Emilie Haas of Liestal I herewith make public in Basel . . ."

my weariness, I went at once to Birley's: I had warned him of my coming by telegram from London. I found him waiting for me, and with him, as I had hoped, but scarcely expected, his ward Louise. I fear his cheerful greeting passed for almost nothing with me in comparison with hers. Her manner was undemonstrative, but there was, I felt, a cordial sincerity in it which came from her true heart, and I was fluttered with hope. There were, however, things more serious and immediate to be talked of than matters of love could then be considered.

I inquired concerning Steinhardt, and was told they had not yet seen him. What, I asked Birley, did he propose to do if Steinhardt came and demanded the surrender of his ward?—would he admit him?

"Admit him!" he exclaimed; "of course. There is no use in shutting him out. He can sell me up in this house and turn me out: he has a bill of sale on everything, and he has been holding it back for some time, to use it now, I expect. But Louise shannot go back to him, unless she likes; I'll find some roof to shelter me and her. Yea," said he, turning his bright face upon her, "we'll get thro' it all right."

"You are both very good to me," said she, going to him and shedding some tears on his shoulder.

"There now—there," said he, patting her. Then turning to me, "She means you, too, my lad."

"Yes," said she, resuming her seat and looking down, "Mr. Birley has told me all you have done for me to find out about my poor father—and all that he and you suspect, too. And I cannot — oh, I cannot!" she cried, shuddering and pressing her hands to her eyes, "look at that terrible, cruel man again!"

"I could not help telling her, my lad," said Birley, in answer to a look of reproach from me. "The old chap wrote questions to her about th' papers you found, and I had to explain."

"But," said I, in some alarm, "you know, Miss Lacroix, we must not, we cannot denounce him; we must not, I doubt, say anything till we have some evidence that he is really the man. I think, I am sure, I soon shall have that evidence, but even then we must be careful what we say."

This, I was glad to find, was not regarded as more than a general, though confident, expression of hope, so I was not asked awkward questions. Now that my anxiety concerning

Louise was for the present allayed I felt exceedingly tired. I promised to call next day to tell them about my journey, and rose to go to my lodgings, where my landlady, I knew, or her herculean son, would still be sitting up for me.

Birley accompanied me to the door, talking according to his wont. He put on a cap which hung in the hall, and, leaving the door ajar, walked with me to the gate. The air refreshed me, and, full as I was of Fräulein Haas' revelation, I felt impelled to tell Birley something of it. Thus, almost unconsciously, we walked away from the gate down the lane leading to the high road, and I was led into telling him all, the more so that he did not seem sceptical of the value of her visions. We had thus left the house some minutes, how many I cannot tell, when several sounds like screams in rapid succession rose behind us into the still night. We stopped together and looked at each other.

"By the L—d!" exclaimed Birley; "I left the door open!"

We were hurried back by a common impulse. We found the door ajar, apparently as we had left it, but when we entered and approached the room in which we had been sitting we heard Steinhardt's voice.

"Well, 'Manuel," said Birley, when we were in the room, "so you've come; I expected you wouldn't be long."

Steinhardt turned (Louise watched him from the other side of the table with fear in her eyes); he did not answer his brother-in-law, but stared at me.

"What is the meaning of this?" he asked. "Where do you come from?"

"From Basel," I answered, "where I was not wanted. Fräulein Haas wished to see you, not me; she is well, and it is for you she is anxious, not for herself. She sent you a line by me." I handed him the letter.

He impatiently tore the envelope, and read with a frown. I knew the words; I tried to read from his face how they affected him. Their point, I thought, found a joint in his harness; he evidently winced; he looked on the floor, on this side and on that, as if for once he were made to pause and consider. But this was only for a moment; he looked up at me, and then at Birley, the same insistent, masterful Steinhardt as before.

"What is it?" he demanded. His tone was not loud, but his eyes seemed standing out as with suppressed rage. "What is it you two are together for? What can you do? You have nothing! —money, influence, nothing!"

"No, 'Manuel," said Birley; "you've grabbed them all."

"Is it?" said he, glaring at me, "that you—you, a beggarly curate!—want, expect to marry an heiress, the heiress of an old family? I have said before that she is not an heiress, that she has no money, and that she is not for you, sir!"

"I have reason," I said, "to believe that Herr Steinhardt does not always speak the truth."

"*Pouf!* You are insolent as well! An insolent beggar is not to be borne! And so you have got, too, this reckless old man to abet you in your tricks and schemes! What for is it?" he demanded of Birley, "that you have set yourself to go against me in this?"

"Partly, 'Manuel," answered Birley, "because I have gradually got convinced you are the biggest villain unhung, and partly because I like this lad Unwin. As for tricks and schemes——"

"*Piff!* You are foolish as well as reckless."

"I say, as for tricks and schemes, I may have an account to settle with you of that sort before I have done, but not to-night."

"Not to-night! After to-night you will be more completely nothing than you have been yet! I will destroy you both! You shall be beggars both, without hope, without reputation."

"These are brave words, 'Manuel, and I know you'll carry them out, if you can; I know you can make me a beggar, but I think Unwin is pretty fit to give an account of himself yet, and of you, too, 'Manuel, if it comes to that. But, see, you'd better go home, for it's Sunday morning, and you're frightening the poor girl there."

This careless dismissal must have been especially exasperating to a man like Steinhardt. He was almost beside himself, yet he still held his fury down.

"You are beggars, sneaks, and cowards both!" he exclaimed.

"Nay, but," said Birley, now roused, and approaching to urge the necessity of a speedy departure, "if we begin calling names we may have the better of it, but not to-night. Come, 'Manuel, you must go!"

He was reluctantly withdrawing, when he and we also were startled by Louise exclaiming, with outstretched hands—

"Where is my father, you wicked man? What have you done with him? Where have you put him?"

He paused a moment to set his face, and then turned again to look at her.

"The girl is gone mad!" he said. "Does she think I am her

father's keeper? Where have I put him! Have I got him in my pocket, do you think?"

I had much ado to keep quiet, but I did manage to hold my tongue. I had my eyes fixed on him, however. As he again turned to go his eyes encountered mine, and, I thought, fell before them. In a moment we heard the door slam behind him, and Louise sank sobbing into a chair. It took all Birley's efforts and mine to calm her. I think I must have become very engrossed with my own efforts, for when at length Louise sat composed and I turned to Birley, Birley was gone.

"You will not leave me," she said, laying her hand on mine, "till he comes back."

That touch precipitated feeling in me, and the confession which I had not intended I should make for some time yet. Considering the highly wrought condition of the nerves of both of us, I do not think it is surprising that we should then have opened our hearts to each other.

"I wish," I said, "that I need never leave your side again."

On an impulse of shyness she tried to withdraw her hand, but I kept it, and she let it stay.

"Louise," I said, "do you know what that man meant when he accused me of seeking to marry an heiress?"

"Yes," said she, with hanging head (the beautiful head!), "I think I do. He said something of the same to me at Blackpool."

"And do you think," I urged, "that if I told that heiress how I loved her, how I had loved her and thought of her from the first moment I had seen her, before I guessed she might be an heiress, —do you think if I said that, it would only be because I expected she would be rich one day?"

"Oh, I do not think that at all! But," she said, looking up with a bright, uncertain smile (which was so winning!—so ravishing!)—"but I am not an heiress."

"You guess, then, it is you I would say this to?—that it is you I love and have ever thought of?"

She trembled violently (dear, fluttered heart!), but I still held her hand.

"I did not guess," she murmured, "until *he* made me think of it at Blackpool. Then I understood why you had been so very good to me, and I——"

"What Louise? What, dear?" I urged.

"Then I—I think," she faltered, "I began to—Do not make me say it!"

She trembled more violently, and her head was bowed so that I could not see her face.

"To love me a little?" I asked. "Do, do say it."

"Yes," she whispered. Her face was hid against my shoulder, and my arms were about her before she added, "but not little; very much!"

It was some moments before either of us spoke again.

"Do you think," said she at length, "it is right that we should have said these things at such a time?—when we do not yet know anything certain about my dear, dear father?"

"Louise," I answered, "darling, I would, you know, save you the smallest pang of pain. But I think I ought to say at once, dear, that you must give up the hope you have clung to, I know, in secret, that you might after all find your father alive. He does not live, I am sure now,—indeed I may say I as good as know where he lies buried, though I must not tell you more at present. All we can hope to do, then, darling, is to give him a decent resting-place. Then we shall go away out of this terrible region of money-grubbing, of horrible toiling and moiling in smoke and steam and poisonous vapours, where the eye cannot rest upon one single spot of Nature unabused—we shall go away to a place where the people are poorer and milder, where we may see clear skies and pure water, and trees and flowers bright and wholesome. Won't that be a welcome change?—and to get away from the constant talk of 'brass.'"

Thus I ran on to lighten her heart and to raise her hope, to turn her thoughts, above all, away from that subject on which she had so brooded.

"Oh, yes," she exclaimed, "that will be sweet. Let us go, do let us go as soon as ever all things are settled, and we have done something for our dear Uncle Birley! We shall do something for him, shall we not?"

We were thus talking when "dear Uncle Birley" came in. He probably suspected the understanding we had come to, but, like a kind and discreet old gentleman as he is, he said nothing then.

"Wondered where I've been —have you? Well, lad, I've just walked down to thy lodgings to tell th' old woman she may go to bed, for thou'rt to stay here the rest of this night,—the last night but one, very likely, that I shall be here myself!"

A tear glistened in his eye and a lump rose into his throat; but, after a momentary pause, he talked on, and these signs of emotion disappeared. We soon went to bed, but I think no one of the three slept much.

In the course of much inti-

mate talk with Louise, which I had that Sunday, I learned how near I had been to losing her while she was at Blackpool, where her vigilant duenna had been a hard, faithful old German servant of Steinhardt's. It was only gradually that I got to know all the anxiety, and even terror, of those days of detention and surveillance, but that day I heard to my horror that the poor girl had been so wrought upon by Steinhardt's representations of her duty to her father, of the heinousness of refusing to fulfil what (Steinhardt declared) had been his frequently expressed wish, that she was on the point of accepting Frank for a husband, when he and his father were called away, the one home, and the other to London.

The knowledge of this, it may be guessed, did not make me feel any the less bitterly towards Steinhardt.

CHAPTER XV.

A TITANIC TOMBSTONE.

On Monday morning the whole neighbourhood was alive with the news that Mr. Birley was "to be sold up." An execution had been put into his house under a bill of sale, and an agent or auctioneer person (acting, of course, by instruction) had stuck notices announcing a sale of "furniture and effects" on boards in the front garden. Steinhardt knew there would be no redemption of the bill, but in his haste to be as peremptory with his old friend as possible, he had overlooked the fact, that by an Act which had come in force in the beginning of that year, he was bound to give Birley five days' opportunity to pay off the bill. Birley, therefore, plucked up the notice boards and threw them into the lane, and then went and talked to the man in possession.

But that afternoon I had business of my own on hand: I had determined to settle to my own satisfaction the exact spot indicated by Fräulein Haas'

vision as that where Lacroix's remains were interred. I mentioned the ruined mill in the beginning of this story, which occupied part of a dreadfully littered little peninsula formed by a curve of the stream. More than one of its walls had fallen, but I had particularly noticed frequently in passing, and had wondered at one wall which lay as flat as the walls of Jericho: it seemed from the public side of the stream to cohere as completely as when it had been standing, except at its outer edges where the bricks were broken and dislocated. This I suspected was the *wall;* and I was resolved to visit it to see whether I could make sure my suspicion was correct.

To get to the mill I had to pass round to the head of the peninsula (I wondered whether Steinhardt had taken that route on his journey with his horrible burden, or whether he had boldly forded the stream opposite one of the side gates to the grounds of his works). This led me between two old rattling mills of some sort, past piles of lumber —broken waggons and fragments of old machinery rusting away, — past some flourishing pig-sties, constructed of old boards and old sacks. I had to pick my way very carefully, for it was beset with gullies and holes worn out by rain torrents, and with entrenchments of cinders and "clinkers." At length I came out upon the open space round the mill. I approached the wall with a shuddering but fascinated sense. In the middle of it, towards the edge which had been the top, was a bolted iron plate, answering exactly to the requirements of Fräulein Haas' vision.

My eye was at once attracted to a part of the wall, near its base, which was altogether unlike the rest. Most of the wall was as bare of anything like vegetation as a mill-wall commonly is, but this part was covered with a fine yellowish-green fungus on the bricks, and grass in the mortar of the interstices. This, I was satisfied, was the spot. Under these bricks had lain, for eighteen months, the mutilated remains of the unfortunate Lacroix, probably at no great depth; hence the eagerness of Steinhardt to cover them with so wide-spreading a tomb-slab as this fallen wall, and hence, also, probably, this traitorous growth of green. As I looked, I wondered how much Steinhardt would give now to be able to move his Titanic tombstone and remove his dead! The wall was too secure a covering! It was the grand mistake of a strong, resolute, and original criminal! — the enormous blunder of the

bold, uncompromising villain, entirely confident in his security against every risk of discovery!

I hurriedly withdrew to consider my course of action. I began to find that I was in an awkward dilemma. My promise to Fräulein Haas forbade a public examination of that spot, yet how could my promise to Louise, that her father's remains should be properly interred—how could that be fulfilled without the discovery becoming public? There was another point which gave me pause:—suppose this rude grave broken into, and its contents identified as the remains of Mr. Lacroix, how could I show that Steinhardt had buried them? How, then, could I bring the crime home so as to move him as I desired?

I resolved to go to Freeman, and talk the difficulty over with him. I had seen little of my friend since his return from London: he had been much from home on some business of his Denomination. He did not even know yet of the successful result of our inquiry upon old Jaques.

I found him in his study, in which he was always most at ease. In accordance with his request I "posted" him "up to date" in my doings and discoveries,—from the finding of the French papers in Jaques' cottage, through the revelations at Basel, to the discovery I had made a few minutes before. He was most impressed with my account of the visions of Fräulein Haas. He was something of a mystic, of the pseudo-scientific kind well known in these latter days, and he would turn his attention to no other point till he had found an explanation of the Fräulein's experiences. His explanation at least satisfied himself, and it certainly was very plausible. He described the phenomena as "magnetic-clairvoyance." "Here," said he, "were two people who had at one time been deeply interested in each other, one of whom (the more sympathetic subject) still thought much of the other;—the one was highly nervous, the other was strong-willed. The strong-willed person was in an extraordinary difficulty, in which he had to put a resolute strain upon all his resources of mind and body and memory. In his casting about in his excited mood for aid to remove his difficulty, he might well have thought, 'If *she* were here!—she who has been of all beings the most devoted to me!' Or, 'If I were only with her, rid of this horrible business!' This strong wishing, this 'reaching out in spirit' for her, would sink to a mere nothing when the difficulty of the time was once settled, and the bond of attraction would sink

loose and lifeless, till it was drawn tense again, and thrilled again with vigour when his need of her returned upon him with a new difficulty. This would account for Fräulein Haas' feeling of being drawn as if away from herself at those times when she had her visions."

This explanation made he was ready to turn with me to more pressing points. He could not see, however, any more than I could, that I was at present likely to effect anything with Steinhardt by private threats of the disclosure of my knowledge, by anything, indeed, but a public investigation, — and even that might do little more than create a public scandal.

"You see," said Freeman, "you have absolutely nothing yet of a reliable kind that can point even circumstantially to Steinhardt as the murderer."

I could not but agree with him, and assent to his advice to "wait." In the meantime Steinhardt must be permitted to pursue his vindictive conduct towards our dear old friend Birley, and his chances of causing further annoyance and anxiety to Miss Lacroix. Our helplessness in the matter chafed severely both Freeman and myself.

"Is there no way at all," I exclaimed, "but the way of evidence to bring the crime home to him?—to really satisfy ourselves that the crime *is* his, and to make him feel that we know it is?"

"Have you any objection," said he, rising as if anticipating I would have none, "to take my wife into counsel? She sometimes has a clear idea in her head."

I said I certainly would like Mrs. Freeman to consult with us, and in a few moments she was sitting opposite me. I told her the whole matter, and pointed out the difficulty of the situation.

"So," said she, "you want to get at some way of bringing it home to him, as you say. If, now, you could only hit upon something like Hamlet's play to catch the King!"

"Ah, yes, Hamlet!" we both exclaimed.

This was our first formative hint, and I need not describe in detail how from that, though aimless-seeming discussion, and wild suggestion of one sort and another, a plan at length was developed. I shall but state the result.

Friday and Saturday of that very week were the days of what are known as Timperley Wakes. They had in the past, I understood, been celebrated with wild orgies of drinking, "mumming," and dancing round and through bonfires. But this "passing

through the fire to Moloch" was no longer a pastime of the people, it had become the dull daily occupation of their lives. The only orgies now known were drinking and fighting, and spending small sums at the booths of the fair. The Church had for some years exerted itself to provide other recreation for some at least of the people. In accordance with this usage there was advertised for Friday evening a mild tea entertainment, to be followed by "Grand Dissolving Views," which last, Freeman had learned, would be shown by a fine new magic lantern Steinhardt had just presented to the Sunday School. Steinhardt was going to honour the affair with his presence. Our plan then was this:—I would contrive through the new curate (whose acquaintance I had already made) to get a sight of the magic lantern and judge of the size of its slides; I would straightway go into the town and buy a certain number of blank slides of that size. On these Mrs. Freeman, who had a knack at such things, would paint the chief scenes of our tragedy. I must then prevail upon the curate, or upon whatever person I could learn was to have the management of the lantern, to introduce them in order at the end of the exhibition.

To carry out our plan with success demanded despatch. I discovered that very evening, by going casually into my landlady's kitchen, that her herculean son was going to have charge of the magic lantern: he was at that moment busily making acquaintance with it. The rest of my task was therefore easy.

CHAPTER XVI.

DISSOLVING VIEWS.

As I recall the final episodes of my story so far as they concern the arch-villain Steinhardt, I am so affected with a shuddering horror that I scarce write legibly. Yet they have such a fascination that I am drawn to the description of them, to the risk of omitting one or two matters of quieter interest, which are yet vital to my story. These I must dispose of.

Birley having no prospect or intention of paying off the bill of sale, and the due legal notice expiring on Saturday morning, it was deemed advisable that other shelter than Birley's roof should be found at once for Louise. I was talking this over with her on Tuesday afternoon in old Jaques' cottage, I may say literally in his hearing; for he had lately given evidence that he heard and understood what was said. I had yet seen no evidence myself; I was therefore exceedingly astonished when, after Louise and I had talked for some time, he grunted, frowned, and made signs with his hand signifying that he wished his writing materials to be placed in his lap. Louise did this; and he wrote, to the amazement of us both,—

"I must now be your guardian, since your father is dead. You must accept the protection of my poor roof."

We demurred; I tried, familiarly perhaps, as one would with a feeble, half-witted old man, to show him that he did not quite understand all the circumstances, but he put me off with so grand an air, that I confess I felt somewhat abashed. The end of it was that Louise consented to take up her abode with him (there was a little room upstairs which she could fit up for herself). He accepted her deference, evidently, as the natural obedience of a young lady of his house to its chief male representative. I had reason presently to be alarmed at the lengths to which this semi-feudal sentiment of authority could go.

He had been watching me with Louise during the whole time we had been in the cottage, and when we rose to go he signified that I should read something which he had written. I read,—

"Come and see me in the morning."

In the morning I went, curious to know what he had to tell me which Louise might not hear. Our conversation was of course cramped and shortened by having to be carried on in writing. In sum it came to this:—He, Jaques De Lacroix, the male representative of his house, had observed that I had a *penchant* for Mdlle. Louise. It was a pity that I had, for her father had destined her to be the wife of her cousin, Honoré Marie Antoinette, Comte De Lacroix. I objected that surely Mdlle. Louise's own feelings should be consulted, and that the Count had certainly not been heard of since her father's disappearance. He answered that he would see to that, but that I must think no more of the young lady. In fine, I was a very estimable young man, and he thanked me very much for my services to himself and to the family interest.

I laughed to myself at this preposterous interference, until I found that Louise, with her French education and sentiment, was disposed to take it seriously. In alarm I took the matter to Birley, who advised me to "let bide; it will come all right."

So Wednesday and Thursday passed away, and the Friday arrived, which to think of even now makes me tremble. It was a daring experiment we were about to attempt, and so very little would make it ridiculous! I had taken partly into my confidence the big son of my landlady (a staunch Lancashire lad of the old breed). With him I went through the slides of my story several times, and showed him how to manage them with effect.

The evening came, and I was almost sinking under excitement. The place of entertainment was that public hall in which Freeman had delivered his famous lecture. The kind of thing was rather new in the village, and there was a crowded attendance of workpeople, especially of Steinhardt's own. Steinhardt, with his wife and son, sat right in front, where the reflection from the sheet fell full upon him. When the lights were turned, some out and others low, Freeman and I crept up behind the sheet, where I waited with trembling pulse and sudden creeping chills till the to me uninteresting part of the entertainment came to an end. The curate acted as lecturer, and

explained with fluency what the views meant, or told something about the places represented. I cannot tell what it was about. At length his series of views and his lecture were finished. There was a moment's pause—to me a wild throb of anxiety—and then the bass voice of the manager of the lantern boomed forth the announcement, "A Lancashire Mystery." Without another word the first picture came upon the sheet (I crept to its corner to watch Steinhardt). It was two men in an attitude of quarrel, surrounded by coloured vapours. The second followed quickly without a word of explanation: the same two men—the one half suffocated, struggling to get out of a vat or bath of vapours, while the other, with mouth muffled, forced him down. Still no word of explanation. Rapidly came the third picture: the one man lying dead and dyed before the other, and beside an open box. Awful whispers began to stir among the spectators, who were the more impressed no doubt by the silence amid which the pictures appeared. I ventured to peep at Steinhardt: he was gazing fixedly, with parted lips. The fourth picture called forth an instantaneous cry of horror: it was, perhaps, too realistic. The dead body lay stripped and *quartered* before the living man, who stooped over it. I fancied that at this sight I heard a low moan from the front bench, but on glancing at Steinhardt, I saw him sitting as before, as if fixed as much by utter astonishment as by horror. The next picture rapidly blotted out the gruesomeness of the other: the portions of the body lay wrapped in three canvas packages, and the man stood by as if pondering. Quickly came the next: the man digging near a ruined building with the three packages by him. "Th' owd spinning mill!" someone exclaimed aloud; I had not thought the resemblance was so recognizable. That was almost immediately succeeded by the same view of the mill, with the packages gone, the hole covered in, and the man standing as if pulling at a rope which passed over the top of the wall.

"The devil!" exclaimed Steinhardt, starting suddenly to his feet. But he recollected himself, and sat down again.

At once the last picture of all flashed upon the sheet: the wall lay flat on the ground, and the man stood by with the loose rope in his hand!

Up started Steinhardt and strode down the big room, amid an ominous silence, to where big Dick stood by his apparatus.

"Where the devil," I heard

him exclaim, "did those horrible pictures come from? They were not among the lot I bought! Come, no d——d nonsense! You must tell me where you got them. Who gave them to you?"

There was now a wild hubbub of talk. Dick, I was sure, had refused to tell him anything about them. In the midst of this the lights flashed forth again, and the people began slowly to disperse with hushed but earnest speech. Freeman and I slipped out by a side door.

I went straight to Jaques' cottage. There I found Birley. In low, anxious voices we began to discuss what would *he* (meaning Steinhardt) do now. Louise wished she had been there, and Birley had just said it was as well she had not, when a heavy foot rapidly approached, the latch was noisily raised, the door was dashed open, and Steinhardt stood before us.

"Soh!" he exclaimed, glaring at Birley and me, "I have found you, sneaks and cowards! You think with your fool's tricks and your pictures you will annoy me, and spoil me! *Piff!* You are nothing!—you are beggars!—you are dirt! I will have you, Sir Parson, arrested for making calumnious charges against me!"

How in his fury had he committed himself!

"Herr Steinhardt," said I, at once, "the pictures, so far as I heard, were unaccompanied by a single word of comment, except what they drew from the people, and no one could say that the figures represented were likenesses. But your guilty black heart has charged you. As it says, I say: 'You are the murderer of your partner Mr. Lacroix and his remains will now be found securely locked, whence you can't move them under that fallen wall!'"

His jaw dropped, and his great body trembled for a moment, then as if with a sudden impulse of fury he made as if he would crunch me with a bearish hug, when Birley came between us.

"Come, 'Manuel, none of that. As I told you, you've not yet done with Law and Lancashire. You'd better go home or go to your experiments."

"Fool!" he cried, still glaring at me. "Idiot! What scrap of proof have you of the ridiculous charge you make?"

"For one thing, I have proof that Mr. Lacroix, before he went to you at the works, called here to see his old uncle."

"Soh! Has the old idiot found his tongue at last, then?"

We were all amazed, Steinhardt as much as any, at the electrical effect of this upon the

old man. I had casually noticed throughout the scene that he had eagerly though painfully listened. I was smitten with fright, as if I saw a dead man rise to his feet, when he now rose at once to his full towering height—a height which I could not have conceived he possessed as he reclined huddled in his chair—and quivering with excitement strove to give utterance. This he could not do, but with lightning gesture he pointed with outstretched arm to the door. Steinhardt stood and stared open eyed,—when he made as if he would himself compel him to go.

"Go, 'Manuel; go, man!" urged Birley, holding the door open.

Steinhardt went without a word, and the old man fell back in his chair—and soon was rigid in death.

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CHAPTER XVII.

THE END.

BIRLEY remained that night at the cottage. When I left to return to my lodgings I was surprised, even for the moment terrified, to see lights across the stream, hovering about the spot which I knew was the temporary grave of Mr. Lacroix. In the moving lights I presently saw figures; I heard sounds, too—the sounds as of a pickaxe.

"They are breaking into the grave!" I exclaimed to myself, and resolved I would go and see.

I hurriedly picked my way round to the place. About the fallen wall—the gigantic tomb-slab of Lacroix, which a brawny pickman, naked to the waist, was hewing at—there stood, in silent, stolid expectation, a crowd of thirty or forty men and lads, with two or three women with shawls over their heads. Many of the men were in the coloured garb of the chemical works.

"Pick on that spot where you see the green," I called to the hewer: I had hastily come to

the conclusion that since I could not hinder the operations I ought to help.

When I said this they all turned and looked at me.

"You know summat about this, do not yo', parson?" asked one.

"Something," said I.

"I'm thinking, Mr. Unwin," said an old man, whom I recognized as the father of the man to whose death-bed I had been summoned some months before; "I'm thinking this that you've shown to-night in th' pictures is th' same business as my lad raved about."

So my connection with the pictures had been discovered.

In silence the hewer picked the bricks loose, pausing now and then to let a comrade throw the *débris* aside. Soon a space was cleared, and he began carefully to pick into and loosen the soil. A shovel was brought into requisition, and the earth and rubbish were thrown aside. And all the while the old ventilating cowl overhead kept grinding stiffly and slowly about, with painful, long-drawn moans, as if it were oppressed with the spirit of the scene.

"I've struck on summat!" exclaimed the hewer, pausing abruptly and speaking in a hurried whisper.

Several hands were now tearing at the soil, and fearfully sounding it.

"I feel a clout," whispered one man, and he began to tug at it.

"Ah!" I exclaimed, in alarm, "you mustn't disturb them,—not to-night, at least!"

"Yea, parson," said the man, "but we mun. We mun see which on us it is he's done for like this. There's Jim Riley gone missing, and Job Kershaw."

There was no suspicion, then that the remains were those of their own master. What could I do? Had I broken my promise to Fräulein Haas? Was I helping even now to make public Steinhardt's crime? Was I not standing assenting by while a terrible vengeance was threatened on the foreigner in the deep, slow Lancashire speech? I felt helpless in the crisis; I permitted myself to be borne along whither it might carry me.

In a very few minutes, the canvas packages, dropping almost to pieces, were out of the ground and laid in silence on a handbarrow. In silence the improvised bier was taken up between two men, and as it was carried away attended by the lanterns, the crowd, as by instinct, formed in procession behind. I was surprised to find myself in front of this strange funeral procession, and close to the bier. Thus in silence we marched away from

the ruined mill through the tortuous and treacherous ways which led to the village.

It was a tolerably clear and still night, and the tall chimney of the chemical works rose firmly outlined and columnar before us. Tinted vapours were curling and coiling about its top and slowly melting away into the air.

"He's got an experiment on hand to-night, they say," remarked one, in a low voice.

"Ay," said another; "and there's a night shift on of five or six."

As we entered upon the paved main street of the village, the regular clank of the clogs of our procession was sufficient of itself to attract attention. But though it was very late, the streets were alive with people, not noisy as might have been expected on a wake-night, but earnest and occupied. It was a novel, but true "Timperley Wakes"; for the whole population seemed astir. Our procession created little or no surprise; it appeared to have been expected. We were greeted with no speech or cries. I but heard now and then fearful whispers of "Who is it?" and "They cannot say yet." Many of the crowd fell into the procession as it slowly passed up the street. There was no tavern open at that late hour to which the bier could be taken for public examination, so it was carried to the door of the public hall, which was soon opened, lit up, and full of people,—as it had been earlier in the evening.

I have no clear recollection of what followed. I appealed to them not to open the packages; I knew who it was. But I only got the obstinate, though respectful answer, "Yea, parson, but we mun." The packages were opened; but I know only I had a horrible vision of a ghastly head with black hair and beard.

"Good L—d!" I heard more than one exclaim. "It's th' master!"

His men had recognized Mr. Lacroix. Hurried and fierce consultations were held, to which I was not invited, and upon which I did not force myself. In a few minutes the whole crowd, except a few who remained to watch over the ghastly remains, marched out of the hall, as if with settled purpose. I accompanied them with no purpose at all of my own; my will seemed absorbed in that of the crowd. We were on our way down the village street, when I was startled by the church-bell beginning to toll: some venturesome spirit had forced his way into the tower.

To explain what followed I must mention here that for some

weeks many of the work-people, the younger folk especially, had been under the influence of those hysterical, revivalistic teachings which have always taken such hold of the ignorant and the half-educated. A contingent of the Salvation Army had held the village for some time, preaching fire and sword, the terrible justice of God, and the pains of everlasting torment to the unbelieving. This kind of doctrine accorded well with the grim, tenacious Lancashire character, and the Army had won a good many recruits among the villagers. These were well represented in the crowd I accompanied.

Before I quite knew where we were we had halted at the gates of the chemical works. Without a word the foremost of the crowd knocked. There was, of course, no answer, and they knocked again. While waiting I listened mechanically to the talk which those about me began in their slow fashion to indulge in.

"God Almighty," said one, "is terrible to a wicked man like him!"

"Yea," said another, "and wicked he is! You mind what Muster Freeman told us that time: it's the likes of Steenhardt has made us such sinners as we are, and has made our place what it is! An' he cannot do w'out murdering his partner, poor man!"

"He'll ha' his proper death for it, sure as God's true!" said a third.

"Yea," said the first; "and God's wrath will not wait for a terrible sinner like him!"

In a little while there was the sound of bolts being drawn, and the watchman appeared at the side-gate. When he saw the crowd he would have shut it again, but he was prevented. Several entered that way, and opened wide the great gates. The crowd entered without commotion, and marched ahead as if it knew its destination. From a shed filled with glowing vapours, came half-a-dozen workmen,—the night-shift, I supposed. They met their comrades and demanded what was to do. They were answered by the man who had insisted to me that the packages must be examined.

"What's to do?" he said. "Yo' do not know? We mun ha' that murdering villain, Steenhardt, out;—yea, but we mun! What's he done? He's been and murdered horribly poor Muster Lacroiks,—yo' shall hear a' about it. And now, by the vengeance of God Almighty on the wicked which cannot wait, he mun be done for this night as he did for his partner!"

At this revelation of their design I was aghast. I pushed my way to the front of the crowd.

"For God's sake!" I exclaimed. "Don't think of such a thing! It will be murder, as certainly as his crime was!"

But my remonstrance was not heeded; I was put aside respectfully, but firmly. The crowd pressed on towards the laboratory. They had not advanced far in that direction, when an explosion burst upon the air, stunned us all, and threw the foremost to the ground. Many ran away, others went forward, —I with these last. It did not take long to discover that the explosion had come from the laboratory, from the broken roof of which rose strange vapours. A little work, and removal of *débris*, and Steinhardt was discovered stretched on the floor, a discoloured and blasted wreck! It was an awful sight! Here, in his own cherished sanctuary, had the vengeance of God leaped forth at him from between his own hands; for a smashed iron retort, which he had been manipulating, lay close by him! His strong nerves had been shaken by the approach of the crowd.

"I came to tell him," said the watchman, in a hushed voice, "that th' crowd was in. He said, 'Go to th' devil, and leave me alone!' and I was just gone away when th' explosion came."

* * * *

My story is in effect finished. But for the satisfaction of those who would like to see the loose ends of its web taken up and tied I must add a page or two.

After legal process of identification and inquest, the ghastly remains of the two partners, LACROIX AND STEINHARDT, the victim and his murderer, were buried, the one with his uncle in the family tomb, the other in the obscure unconsecrated ground of the churchyard. This done, the affairs of the firm were wound up.

In the necessary examination of all papers some letters and documents were found in a small safe in Steinhardt's "study" at Timperley Hall, which sufficiently explain what still needs explanation in the Lacroix mystery:—the substantial ground of offence on which the partners met on that fatal night, and the unwavering resolution of Steinhardt to get Louise married to his son. The letter which came first in order of date made clear one side at least of the quarrel. It was from Lacroix to Steinhardt, and was dated "Paris, March 3rd, 1882." It was evidently in reply to one from Steinhardt, containing a proposal affecting Louise, — what

proposal will readily be guessed. This Mr. Lacroix warmly declined to entertain, and begged it would not be again mentioned.

"My daughter," he wrote, "is promised to her cousin, the Count de Lacroix. As for the £20,000 damages, that must be reckoned a joint business loss; there can be no doubt about that. I hope we have done for the future with playing tricks with that Patent."

The next letter, of date several days later, was of great interest —at least to Louise and to me. It was stained and blurred as with some liquid dye: it had doubtless been taken by Steinhardt from Lacroix's person after death. It was addressed to "Mdlle. De Lacroix"; it was written on fine "foreign" paper with crest and motto, and contained many polite and gallant expressions of the Count De Lacroix's devotion to his lovely cousin, whom, he said, he hoped to come and see in the summer. How was it he had never come? —never even been heard of?

These questions were answered by a second letter from the count, dated in May, 1882, and addressed to Mr. Lacroix, and by the postcript of a letter of about the same date, written in German though from Paris, and addressed to Steinhardt. The count's letter excused him to his "dear uncle" from paying his promised visit: he was too ill to think of leaving France. The letter to Steinhardt was evidently from a compatriot. It was mainly about business affairs; its matter of interest for us was squeezed into a corner:— "*You ask me about the Count De Lacroix. I learn he is still busy killing himself with absinthe.*"

Lastly came the most astonishing communication of all. It was dated several months later, in the November, I think, of 1882. It was from a Paris lawyer, who apparently had the management of the De Lacroix affairs. In few words, it informed Mr. Lacroix that the young Count Honoré was dead, and saluted Count Paul, his successor. ("Le roi est mort;— vive le roi.") And the congratulated count was dead, too. With this letter were tied up two or three legal documents, of which I cannot attempt much account, though they are now in my possession. They were a copy of certificate of the death of Honoré Marie Antoinette, Count De Lacroix, and certain papers showing of what the De Lacroix property consisted, — *château*, estates and *rentes*,—and with them, finally, a later note from the lawyer to Steinhardt, who had evidently apprised him of Mr. Lacroix's "disappearance,"

and of the half-fact that in the meanwhile he was guardian of Paul's heiress.

"By George!" exclaimed Birley, when he had made this discovery, "but 'Manuel was a tough schemer! He was determined to set his lad up as a French Count, with a *château*, and all the rest o't!"

I ventured to doubt whether Louise's husband would be Count De Lacroix, though Louise certainly was the inheritrix of the *château* and the rest. "Do you mean to tell me, then, the lass is not a countess?" he exclaimed.

That I could not declare, though I was certain no handsomer or sweeter countess could be found in the whole wide world.

"True for you, my lad," said he; "and you're in the luck of it."

It may seem absurd to say that for a time this discovery of Louise's rank and wealth filled me with melancholy and misgiving. I was proud of her greatness, but I feared I had no right to seek to share it. Who was I? A poor, commonplace curate, whose only recommendation to her favour,—to her notice, even,—was that I loved her entirely and had worked for her. Was it not my duty to give her back her promise,—if she would take it?

Birley was eager to go home at once, to tell Louise all about it (she was again established in his house, with Mrs. Steinhardt). He wished me to go with him to assist in the explanation; I endeavoured to excuse myself, but in vain.

"Come, lad," said he, "I can see what you're thinking. Keep a stiffer back, man; do not you be so shy of yourself. See—tha!—I saw a duke once—a great Scotch duke—and he was the crabbedest looking tailor-body ever you saw in all your life. If you cannot mak' a better count, once you get used to it, than he made a duke, I'll eat my hat, lad!"

We found Louise with Mrs. Steinhardt in the drawing-room.

"Aha!" cried Birley, in his cheery voice; "I have a word to say unto thee, my lady."

Louise glanced in some surprise from him to his sister.

"Which of us do you mean, Mr. Birley?" she asked.

"Which of you? Well, Sally might have had to do with it, but, as it happens, she hasn't. I mean thee, my lady countess."

"Countess?" she exclaimed. "Why, what has amused you, Mr. Birley?"

"I do not quite know," said I, wishing to get the explanation over, "that Mr. Birley is right to call you countess; but we

have found evidence that your cousin the Count is dead, and that you, being next in succession, inherit the De Lacroix *château* and other property. You are a great French heiress, Louise, whether you are countess or not."

"Me?" she cried, "Oh! what strange thing is this?"

Birley sat down and entered into explanation, while I withdrew to the window. Without exactly watching her, I observed that she listened in patient, wondering silence to his rambling account of the matter—dear old gentleman!—and occasionally glanced about at me and at her friends.

"So, my lady," concluded Birley, "there you are, and we are all thy humble, obedient servants."

I was astonished to see her hide her face in her hands, and burst into tears.

"I do not wish at all," she cried, "to be countess, or to be anything but what I am. And you want all to put me far away from you! I do not wish to have their *château* and their *rentes!*"

In a moment I had thrown aside all misgiving, all fear about what might be my duty, and I was by her side, calling her by her name, and assuring her we were all as much devoted to her as before. As in a dream, I saw Birley and his sister quietly withdraw.

"Louise," I said, "let me confess to you that I have been thinking I ought to give you up—to give you back the promise you gave me, before either you or I guessed you were the great lady we now know you are. It was terrible—terrible to think I ought to do it; but—but—ah, Louise! what must I do?"

She turned on me her gracious, beautiful face, and looked through the tears that still glistened like dew about her eyes.

"You still love me, then, as much as you did? But why should you not? Am I not the same Louise? I do not feel that *châteaux* and *rentes* make it unnecessary that you should love me!"

"Then, you do not——?"

"Ah, hush!" she cried, stopping my mouth with her hand. "You must not say such things! It is wicked! But I know you did not doubt me! I know! I know!"

Shall I go on? What need is there? Surely every reader may guess the rest:—that Louise de Lacroix is now known to the world as Mrs. Gerald Unwin—to me as the dear partner of all life's joys and cares and duties, the tender and faithful heart who has put away all the terrors and

shadows of the past, and cherishes only the lessons of humility, faith, patience, and duty which it has taught.

"What," some may ask in conclusion, "about Frank Steinhardt, and his little sweet-voiced schoolmistress?"

Frank was more of a musician than a chemical dye manufacturer. The chemical works were, therefore, sold, and Frank and Mrs. Frank are now known in musical circles, he as a pianist, and she as a singer of repute.

I cannot end without a word concerning the strange woman whose visions played so great a part in the elucidation of the Lacroix mystery—poor Fräulein Haas. I put off as long as I could the unwelcome task of informing her of Steinhardt's death. When at length I did write I told her in few words that a retort had burst upon him while he was engaged on an experiment, and had killed him at once. Soon after I had written I was surprised to receive a note from her, containing only these words—

"I knew it. It was God's doing."

THE END.

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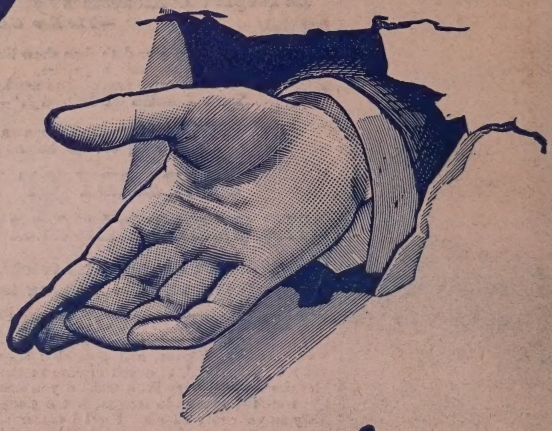

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